



A NEW RACE DIPLOMATIST

By
Jennie Bullard Waterbury



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SACRAMENTO,

A New Race Diplomatist



"I LOVE A WOMAN HOPELESSLY"

A
New Race Diplomatist

A NOVEL

BY

Fennie Bullard Waterbury

AUTHOR OF "AN AMERICAN ASPIRANT"

ILLUSTRATED BY
EDOUARD CUCUEL



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“Les barrières servent à indiquer où il faut passer.”

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CHAPTER I

THE AMERICAN POINT OF VIEW

"THE post will be no sinecure in the forthcoming instance," asserted the newly-sworn-in President. "It will govern an international complication."

"Carried over?" inquired Markoe.

"Let us first dismiss the point in hand," was the cautious response.

Markoe had stepped into the private office of the nation's chief in answer to a summons he had received the day before.

It was a week since the President had sat at his desk with a sketched plan before him ; a chart which indicated an unfaltering memory, and a unique faculty for generalship. Below it were written three names, Burroughs, Spencer, and Markoe.

To-day Markoe stood before him, an individual who was dreaded more, understood less, yet felt to a larger extent than any man within the political radius out of office.

The alluded-to complication involved a dispute over the attainment of American rights to erect factories at a place on the frontier between France and Alsace-Lorraine, in which to fabricate domestic goods by aid of foreign ingredients.

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In lesser monopolies this right had been bought, grasped, and held ; the ground had been broken and built on. In the present case, where Germany might in a measure profit off the requisite if merely temporary establishment of a colony of manufacturers and their families, a hint, administered through the Bureau of Foreign Affairs, had rung a note of warning which indicated that opposition would be unmitigated, if roused.

"Burroughs," stated Markoe later, in answer to the President's somewhat guarded inquiry, "can look on with more ability than any man I know. He is a good listener, a trained observer. He practises discretion ; he plays chess with his adversaries, and his friends even, without either one of them suspecting his game, and he can manœuvre as deftly as an adjutant on parade. Moreover, he is a linguist of no mean talent, considering the lack of practice from which a stay-at-home suffers. That adjunct of diplomacy will be imperative in the forthcoming issue."

Markoe had been informed of France's intolerance through a member of the Cabinet at the President's instigation.

"A good accent, eh?" interpolated the head of the nation slowly, taking up a palm-leaf fan, and waving it to and fro violently, while conspicuously bestowing scant attention upon Markoe. "Where did he acquire his knowledge, and, if I may ask the question without appearing too personal, why do you consider yourself capable of judging?"

The President's bidden guest was obliged to turn his head slightly to meet the eyes of his interlocutor with his own. His were colorless.

The President's were soft as the proverbial murmur of the sucking dove. Yet the two resembled, curiously enough, a pair of racers, with a common goal ; achievement.

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"I was educated in Paris," vouchsafed Markoe, as though registering an insignificant afterthought. "Burroughs speaks like the college-bred American. He mastered his French grammar once, but he has left it, since, slightly practised. As far as he has gone, it is presentable. He judges France," humorously, "from the stand-point of the traveller who manages to make himself understood by people whom he considers not worth the effort. He possesses a unique fund of wit. His may be the record of having mastered the game of the century with less expenditure of individual force than usual."

"What's the game?" inquired the President, idly. He was turning the leaves of a note-book near his elbow. If he were listening, otherwise than superficially, he certainly accorded diplomacy's propounder scant attention in the process.

"Silence first," retorted Markoe, concisely, "conscientious concentration next, and a master makeshift when requisite. Turn about is fair play in diplomacy, love, and arbitration."

The President raised his eyebrows.

"Your definition," he returned, ponderously, "is adequate, if partially prejudiced by, let us say, enthusiasm. I have played—I should say I have been quoted as playing—diplomacy myself. Is it acquirable, do you think, or innate?"

"Innate," flashed out Markoe, without an instant's hesitation.

"And you consider Burroughs capable of——"

"Burroughs can play any rôle. He never commits himself until thoroughly informed as to his opponent's reserve. He holds the bauble called success in the palm of his hand."

The President did not speak. The eyes under his heavy

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seamed lids were invisible. Two moments later he stirred slowly ; he lifted them. They were dull, comparatively lifeless.

“ You think the affair contains possibilities of difficulty ? ”

“ Undeniably. Your representative will be on the ground, however. He will study his hour and his man. He can manipulate, determine, and command when the time is ripe. He may also keep himself out of any imbroglio by not creating one.” The speaker stopped. An amused smile drifted across his lips. The situation, in his opinion, evidently offered scope for some fine work. “ He will battle with a formidable antagonist,” he added. He laughed aloud.

“ Lamballe ? ”

“ Lamballe.”

“ A conservative ? ”

“ A radical in personal matters ; he was trained conservatively. A conservative as regards monopolies out of the new world ; not as to progress in the old. Personally one of the most charming of men, of the *ancien régime*. The *ancien régime* is nothing if not chevalresque. I met him some twenty years since at a *château* party in Touraine, where I went hawking with a *grande dame* of the French aristocracy in her own forest,—as exact as possible an imitation of Francis I. and his court. In Burroughs’s case it will be a struggle of tact and patience against trained astuteness and the consciousness of pedigree of the dyed-in-the-wool imperialist who has eaten humble pie for the sake of his personal interests, who declines it when it assumes the form of an international concession.”

“ If we fail ? ” suggested the President.

“ Ah, that would mean more than the exchange of a few acres to us ; graver results than the loss of good fellowship to them. The deposit is an immense one. The projected

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industry promises mutual benefits. Theirs is a dog-in-the-manger policy at the best. They don't want that chalk bank until we signify a regard for it ; then they cling to it. We are bound to win, though. Burroughs can outwit Lamballe in tenacity and common sense. Besides, his antagonist is too intelligent a man to conduct so important a contest—when he finds it contains as much for France's good as for ours—in anything but an amicable spirit."

"You mean——?"

"I mean—— We have the map here," drawing a sketchily traced plan from his pocket, and stretching its curled edges out flat on the table before the President. "You perceive, there is not a stone's throw at this point between Alsace-Lorraine and France. The establishment you propose to erect could stand as well on Prussian foundation as on French soil, *if the chalk deposit extends across the border*. Do the French reject our offer——"

"Well?"

"We can treat with Prussia. One is as good as the other to us. We have given the preference to France thus far, as I understand it, because our site has been determined. If she meets us half way we are ready to embrace her offer and cede her her rights."

"But say she opposes us?"

"We have her enemies to deal with, then. The land about Carembourg abounds in the material whose principal ingredient is the indispensable adjunct to the fulfilment of our plans. There is also the possibility," continued Markoe, as he folded the piece of badly thumbled paper, to place it in under the flap of his vest-pocket, "of our being accused of collusion with——"

"With——?"

"Germany."

There was a pause.

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Markoe subjoined, succinctly, "Burroughs cannot fail if he plays the game as it should be played."

"I am pleased to have learned your views upon the subject," remarked his listener in a colloquial tone of voice.

Markoe recognized in it the signal for his dismissal. He rose.

"You command a wide scope for character in search in the profession you are at present pursuing, do you not?" inquired the President.

Markoe lifted his hat off the table before him.

"A lawyer," he conceded, lightly, "like a family physician, may be said to personally conduct a private character signal bureau."

"Do you never long to change your field of action, to extend your horizon, to use your hardly acquired knowledge *pro bono publico* rather than lock its mammoth usefulness within your own breast?"

Markoe stooped and picked up a paper which had fallen to the floor. He laid it neatly in its place before answering.

"I have at times believed myself to be possessed of faculties which are as yet unawakened," he finally returned with deliberation, "but, up to the present, no one else having suspected them, I have deemed it wiser to keep them dormant."

He colored a trifle, as though proved guilty of an undeniable weakness.

The President rose and walked with his guest towards the door.

"It's a pity to waste anything," he remarked. "Good morning."

Markoe crossed the threshold. He closed the door.

The President stood on the spot where he had taken leave of his guest for some seconds.

Then he spoke.

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His words broke against the silence of the room like bell-strokes on a cylinder. Their import conveyed a picture quaint and Puritan-haunted. They were not new, neither were they original. Between the lines an attentive reader could have discovered a gentle rebuke, some humor, and a settled resolve.

“ ‘Why don’t you speak for yourself, John?’ ” asked the President.

A week later, by cable and otherwise, was announced to the civilized world the detail of a totally unexpected appointment :

“As United States Ambassador at Paris, Stephen W. Markoe.”



CHAPTER II

COUNTERPARTS

MARKOE, notwithstanding his modest opinion of himself, had some years before considerably stirred the sanctum sanctorum of New York’s upper set by his uncommonly clever handling of a divorce suit which had been far on the way to becoming a cause célèbre.

It had been whispered that the suppression of what might have been a nauseating record of nineteenth century erotomania owed itself to this eminent lawyer’s tactful adjustment of secret difficulties ; that a prominent household which headed that army of martyrs facetiously denominated as the “heavy swells,” owed its present glowing conjugal prosperity to this wary friend and adviser, who had known just when and how to take the bull by the horns.

What also edified the onlookers was the fact that Markoe appeared totally undesirous of the prominence his treatment

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of the case lent him. He had since pursued the unruffled tenor of his intellectual way apparently unaware of any benefit which might have accrued to him therefrom.

His wife, one of those winsome, graceful creatures with which the world is too seldom endowed, had drawn a little circle of her own close about her. She was sought far and near, because she dared to carve her own groove in social matters and hold to it. This requires more moral courage than is popularly admitted. Mrs. Markoe was about fifteen years her husband's junior. Three years before this story opens she had been one of the season's beauties.

When Markoe was notified of the honor the President had conferred upon him he realized at once that, added to his personal and official household, he would stand in need of a sturdy helper ; a friend who, with time to spare, an ample income to call upon, and ability of no mean order, must be close at hand to perform deeds of equal energy and tact.

He first sought this paragon, without disclosing his need, among his constituents,—almost immediately to arrive at the conclusion that it was not in the ranks of the diligent that he was to discover what he sought. Neither among the seekers for place was he to fall upon the individual to fill the difficult post which he had elected to make. The office would be, obviously, unremunerative ; the mission obscure, possibly thankless. He could not request that an able worker, well established, should throw up a good position for a possibly bad one. He had neither the right nor the inclination. What he could do, however, was to seek a young person of as yet unacknowledged proficiency among the rank and file of idlers which constituted so large a majority of his social acquaintances.

Markoe held an idler in the faintly contemptuous estimation of most men of his calibre who have struggled from

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preference rather than by force of positive need. The man who did nothing more arduous than ride across country after the fox with the hounds, the man who drifted from summer sea to summer sea in a perfectly appointed yacht searching for new sensations, the man who led cotillons, who golfed inordinately, and flirted subordinately, the pleasure-seeker, the misanthrope, and often, in consequence, the voluptuary and the sceptic, he considered insignificant.

His acquaintances, the young millionaires, he adjudged, perhaps unjustly, to be incompetent. They exemplified a class that was comparatively obnoxious to him in its reckless expenditure of seemingly misused force. But, oddly enough, he made his choice from among their rank and file.

He obtained his first glimpse of Jack Conway when the latter was riding across country. Markoe stood in a buckwheat-field giving final directions to his head gardener concerning his stewardship during the coming Ambassador's enforced absence from the United States.

The young figure came whirling through the air, which was spicily fragrant with the odor of pine, like an embodiment of vim and recklessness. The mare on which he was astride was a beast with clean fetlocks and roving eyes, fiery, neatly set up, and thoroughbred, like her rider.

The two cleared a stone wall with ease. Markoe drew back instinctively as she trotted forward to slip her nose into Fownes's evidently familiar hand.

"She's a daisy, Fownes, and no mistake," cried the young fellow, cheerily, as he slid off her back, and began beating the mud from his top-boots with his whip.

His eyes then fell on Markoe. He lifted his riding-cap, disclosing a small, well-formed head. It was adorned with
3 ebon hair parted straight in the middle and slicked down

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at both sides after the fashion of the day, a deep, rich olive complexion, a clean-cut nose, and a mouth which was marked with a curiously distinct expression of race and will.

"She's been heatin' 'er 'ead hoff, Mister Jack, an' no mistake ! H'it's a pity you cawn't come down of'ner to 'er. She's a beauty," said Fownes.

"Too far," returned Jack, laconically. He was looking at his watch already.

"I say, Fownes," he added, rapidly, with an apologetic gesture towards Markoe,—a gesture which meant, "You'll understand ; I haven't time to explain,"—"run her down to the stable, will you," pointing to a barn some rods distant ; "you'll find a boy there to attend to her. Haven't time to do it myself and catch the train. Miscalculated." He pitched Fownes a quarter, and made off. There was the whistle of the locomotive.

In a second the tall, slim figure had scrambled across the top rail of a neighboring fence, and was scurrying across an open field in hot haste. Markoe and Fownes watched him anxiously until he was dragged ignominiously to the platform of the train just moving off.

The young fellow waved his cap to them gleefully, after he had gathered himself to his feet.

"Jack who?" inquired Markoe, idly.

"Conway, sir. 'Is mother owns that big place, Gnarlwood, up in Westchester County. 'E's the richest visitor in these parts, an' as easy-goin' an' simple as a child. There ain't a cat about 'ere but luvs 'im. 'As more than fifteen 'osses down below there at Tuttles's trainin' fur a steeple-chase that's comin' hoff at White Plains next month. 'E's a sport an' no mistake. There ain't a blud in the ole country could beat 'im fur lov o' hanimals."

It was plain that Fownes knew of what he spoke.

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"Conway!" ejaculated Markoe. "Not the son of Mrs. Livingstone Conway? But yes, yes,"—as Fownes began to scratch his head dubiously,—"to be sure. He must be that age by this time. How time flies! He is the same individual of whom Somers spoke to me recently."

"'E's a thoroughbred, sir," confirmed Fownes solemnly.

"Why, there ain't a groom on Long Island don't luv Mister Jack. 'E's that friendly-like."

"Mm," rejoined Markoe.

Later he escorted his wife to a ball at the Randolphs.

The cotillon took place after supper. Its leader was Jack Conway. From remarks that were let fall here and there Markoe had already discovered him to be one of the most popular in the dancing set.

He learned, moreover, that he was feared a little for his cut and dried cynicisms and expressed distaste for anything but the most daring of escapades, and adored for his devotion to his mother, to whom he owed his position of social prominence, and for the enormous wealth over which she stood trustee.

Mrs. Conway was a widow. She was exceedingly beautiful. Blessed with a large personal income she had married a colossal fortune, and at the same time given evidence of superlatively cool judgment.

In many respects she was a remarkable woman. She was an acknowledged leader, could unmake social reputations with a shrug of her polished shoulders, and bestowed her attention on nothing unworthy of her consideration. For her seldom mistaken perspicacity she was an acknowledged power in her world.

Naturally that world had accepted her at her own valuation,—an apparently exalted one.

If it forgot, in its subservience to her great wealth, that character alone has been known to merit distinction, this

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was possibly because that major supremacy is often overlooked in the rush and go of life by those who hold high places.

The cotillon, held in the famous Louis XIV. drawing-room, was as pretty a sight as even an overworked man of the world, a little disgruntled with a coming revolution in his methodical arrangements, could have wished.

In the midst of the third set the dancers got tangled up through lack of attentiveness or effervescence of spirits.

Conway had been unflagging in his attempts to make the affair a success. A close observer could have seen his heart was not in it. He preferred a clover-patch to a boudoir. That preference, up to the present, was the healthiest germ in him.

But when his favorite figure bade fair to become an enigma, the leader, with a slight flush on his face, cleared the middle of the room with a gesture, knelt on one knee quietly, dotted, with a pencil, starting-points on the polished floor, summarily ordered the dancers into line,—as though they were his regiment and he their captain,—and in five minutes the set was what he had determined it should be in the beginning,—a mathematical calculation.

He barred it off later with bands of white and rose-colored satin ribbon. As the couples filed by slowly, to the tune of a Waldteufel march, the applause from the onlookers was tremendous and unstinted.

A half-hour later Markoe approached him.

Conway's was a nervous, passionate face with Spanish eyes and blood-red lips ; an odd face among those Anglo-Saxon ones with their perfect control of feature, and the retentive expression in the eyes which passes unremarked unless compared with less well-governed countenances. His conversation was vivid. He could turn a speech into a picture with three words. There was surplus vitality in

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his light poise which was essentially magnetic. He talked like one who, to conceal the effort it cost to walk unscathed across hot ploughshares, such as age, death, and loss, emitted platitudes and epigrams whose mission was to conceal the shudder this chance victim apprehended.

"Ingenious," remarked Markoe in his vibrant voice, pointing to the dots on the floor near them, as he approached.

Conway glanced across his shoulder at the speaker. He clapped his hands for the dancers to secure partners.

"I am something of a landscape-gardener," he explained, smiling. "My mother's place at Gnarlwood, you know. It fretted her when I imported a green hand, and couldn't apprentice him. I have too much time on my hands."

He gazed dubiously at his slender palms. They were olive-stained, like his face.

"Enjoy planning?" inquired Markoe, quietly, the next time the intricacies of the dance brought Conway in his direction. Markoe was not dancing himself.

"My lean is in that direction," returned Conway. "I fancy I have a latent talent for craggy projects which demand manœuvring and mediocre ability."

"Would you like to use it?" inquired Markoe. His voice was animated.

Conway was twisting his small black moustache reflectively. He had been looking down. He looked up.

"I like anything," he ejaculated, with a glance about him to make sure he was not heard, "anything, that is, which means work instead of play, life in place of stagnation. I envy," harshly,—it was astonishing the bitterness the mere words conveyed,—"I have always envied the laboring man who earns his right to rest." His eyes were sombre as they met the steady orbs bent full upon him.

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Markoe nodded.

He made Conway feel that he attached small value to his words, but that their import nevertheless was with him in its most exalted sense.

"Handicapped," he let forth abruptly. Conway distributed garlands of la France roses among the dancers, and set the orchestra, which was concealed in the gallery above, to playing the pas de quatre before he answered, "What?"

There were two perpendicular lines between his eyes which seemed to have taken their place by right. He was contemplating Markoe with a puzzled expression. "I can't altogether see what you mean by 'handicapped,'" he ejaculated, aggressively, after a moment's reflection.

Markoe leaned against the wall mutely regarding the dancers.

"You've been coddled too much," he explained, finally. "You need——"

"I need——?" urged Conway, eagerly.

"Jostling."

"How the deuce did you discover that?" demanded Conway, abruptly.

Markoe did not answer. He had a fashion of making his silence convey more than his speech.

Ten minutes afterwards,—Conway had been taken out repeatedly, and deferred to by more than one man for presentation,—Markoe remarked nonchalantly, "You'd like to fight wild tigers, eh?"

Conway started.

"Would I?" he rejoined.

"Why not men?" inquired Markoe, tentatively.

"Do you call these men," asked Conway, contemptuously. He waved a nervous hand in two or three directions; it fell to his side limply.

"I presume you have heard of my appointment?"

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"Naturally," responded Conway. The sympathetic lines under his moustache quivered, and then grew still. "Allow me to seize this occasion in which to congratulate you."

Markoe bowed.

"The great man," he stated,—Conway suddenly realized that the lines at the corners of the speaker's eyes were essentially keen and shrewd,—“is he who grasps his opportunity.” The statement seemed impersonal. It was not.

"I am glad the American nation is to be represented by a citizen of whom we are so justly proud," cried Conway, in a sort of burst which was unusual to him.

"Drop that, will you?" interpolated Markoe. He lifted his right arm involuntarily, the hand across his eyes, the elbow upward, as though warding off a blow.

"It's true," insisted Conway, obstinately, "and I'm not the first one to——"

"Would you like to accompany me?" inquired Markoe.

Conway turned unsteadily, and looked straight at him now. He thought his hearing was becoming defective. It was a whole hour after supper. He wondered.

"Because if you wish it," continued Markoe, "I have a post at my disposal which I am inclined to believe you might fill."

"But——," ejaculated Conway.

"But me no buts," interpolated the coming Ambassador, with a twinkle. "The question is, will you drop all this, and do the work I shall set you at in Paris and out of it? It may be a thankless task. It may be a glorious one. The situation contains, in any case," he stopped a moment as though searching for the word which would most clearly express his meaning, "meat," he subjoined.

"Am I fit for it?"

"Will you go, or won't you?" impatiently.

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Conway's hand shot out from his side, and grasped the powerful one which was extended towards him.

"I go," he said, as though registering a vow.

"Thanks, don't mention it," returned Markoe, colorlessly. Made aware of an advancing couple he dodged back, and took up his nonchalant position against the wall.

"It's not official," he remarked to his wife in relating the circumstance, "but that's my business."



CHAPTER III

AT GNARLWOOD

MRS. LIVINGSTONE CONWAY was giving a high tea in honor of the newly-appointed Ambassador to France. The function was held in her famous scarlet dining-room. All New York had come, in drags and by rail, to glorify and be presented.

The guest of the day, having concluded a conspicuously indigestible repast, stood chatting with his predecessor in a window embrasure at the end of the beautiful room. The ex-Ambassador's countenance, freshened with outdoor exercise, ruddy, and lit by a pair of fiery blue orbs, was alert. He was two inches taller than his smooth-faced, steel-eyed interlocutor.

He measured the latter's outward stature deprecatingly as the two exchanged opinions.

"The place has its disadvantages," he affirmed. "The French possess one talent which they have trained to perfection,—adaptability. France's sins may be laid at the door of too ardent an appreciation of beauty, always."

"I am told you regretted the place when it was withdrawn. Have I been correctly informed?"

AT GNARLWOOD

"I did, and did not. For my family's interests the post was most alluring. For my own—— Well, I confess, I was balked. Now that I look back it appears to me that the courtesy I received concealed many things the value of which I, at the time, ignored. I may be mistaken. One is apt to doubt even hindsight when beaten. As diplomatists they are superlatively accomplished. The Anglo-Saxon must look to it in the future if he hopes to excel in astuteness. The Gaul will vanquish every time."

"You speak advisedly?"

"Yes. I will do even more. I will bid you beware of one Parisian. He is frankly opposed to our new-world claims. As a power he is almost immeasurable. That sounds exaggerated. It is not. I accustomed myself to regarding him as an edition de luxe of a Scotland Yard detective, so thorough is his knowledge of foreign and domestic affairs. His name is Ferdinand Lamballe."

Markoe's expression altered very slightly. "Enlighten me," he suggested.

"Lamballe," began the ex-Ambassador, a stinging bitterness in his tone, "has risen from the ranks, in spite of his pedigree. His property was confiscated in his youth. Unlike his titled contemporaries he did not meekly accept his fate. He did what the French call *"lutter."* That is, he exhibited from the first a keen desire to tussle for his share of life. When I was in France one side of his prismatic genius was bent upon the drama. He was presenting a series of satires which laid bare the idiosyncrasies of his contemporaries. By a fairly considerable minority he was cordially detested for his pains. Added to the notoriety he attained as public censor of human nature's foibles,—he expresses an inordinate dislike for humbug,—he was conducting at one and the same time a syndicate which gov-

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erned numerous lesser syndicates. The man is unique inasmuch as he writes criticisms of his own plays in such perfection that they alone are seized by the public with avidity,—thus insuring success. He is beloved by many, because he rarely hesitates to do his opponents full justice at his own expense. That is the reason I never lose the chance to award the French character the palm for appreciation. Lamballe more than once has been suspected of acknowledging an opponent's superiority, even in defeat."

"Ah! You admit, then, that he may be defeated?"

"Who can tell? He is the man to whom I alluded when I said I had been 'balked.'"

"May I inquire, inasmuch as you have gone so far?"

"It is your due. The affair at issue was one whose consummation would have in no manner whatsoever jeopardized the welfare of France. Indeed, rather would it have insured her prosperity by inculcating a novel branch of industry. Outside of the duties coincident with a foreign post I was intrusted with a secret mission. I failed."

"The mission?"

"The establishment at Carembourg, near Alsace-Lorraine, of a mammoth factory in which to fabricate home goods by aid of foreign material which can only be obtained on the frontier."

"Foiled?" asked Markoe. His suddenly animated tone contained a strident note.

"More. I was duped, played, magnificently played. In the end the subject was courteously closed. In this Lamballe's hand was invisible. I learned of that later. It seems that nationally he bears us no grudge, but that personally he abhors our increasing monopolies. He had determined to score. He scored."

"But surely you could have forced his hand, discovered

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the root of his power ! One man may not buy up a frontier, nor control it, nor refuse it. The assumption is absurd. He must have governed some pull you overlooked."

"His power consists in knowing his man," returned the ex-Ambassador, dryly. "Lamballe's victims are only made aware, *after* having been cut to pieces, of their total inability to put themselves together again."

"There might be a way," remarked Markoe.

"You say——?" ejaculated the ex-Ambassador with an astonished expression.

"I say there might have been a way."

"And that way?" ironically.

Markoe did not answer. He was gazing absently at a rift in the clouds outside. The young moon looked through. "You say he is benevolent?" he inquired, irrelevantly, after some moments.

"He is called the 'patented moralist of France,' " stated the ex-Ambassador, with obvious incredulity.

"Did you know him personally?"

"No. He eludes as successfully as he precludes. Albeit the air is alive with his epigrams, the stage charged with his witticisms, the boulevards ringing with his name, he is hard to find. Those who have met him call him a philanthropist. I have been told he is personally a dangerously fascinating man."

"Could you not command?"

"In my position? That would have too forcibly emphasized acknowledged impotence. You must remember that it was only later I discovered the magnitude of his reach."

"With whom did you treat?"

"With men in his employ. Their name is legion." The ex-Ambassador glanced about him. He leaned forward guardedly. "It was a defeat I have never for-

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given," he murmured, in a sibilant whisper, through his teeth, "a lock to which only he holds the key."

"I feel honored by your confidence," observed Markoe.

"There is no impotence so aggravating as that of enforced inaction," hissed the ex-Ambassador. His face was congested. His eyes were a trifle bloodshot.

"To an American, you should qualify," subjoined Markoe, flashing a keen glance at the speaker. Then he said, tersely, "You are right. The only way," he added,—he had turned towards a charming feminine figure advancing towards them,—“is to reopen fire with bigger guns.”

"Tell me," cried Mrs. Markoe, "is it endurable,—the colony?"



CHAPTER IV

AN UNCONDITIONAL COMPACT

"THE American colony," replied the ex-Ambassador, "is a law unto itself." He was smiling broadly. "It is made up of people who possess the courage of their convictions, if seldom that of other people. I cannot answer whether or no you will fancy it, but of one thing I am certain,"—he had moved towards Mrs. Markoe, in a courtly fashion he lifted her hand and laid it across his coat-sleeve, he evidently proposed to lead her across the French window-sill into the conservatory beyond; but Mrs. Markoe had other views, she recoiled almost imperceptibly,—“of one thing I am certain,” reiterated the ex-Ambassador, continuing his speech, albeit evidently somewhat nonplussed, “and that is, that the colony will be more than able to ‘endure’ Mrs. Markoe.”

Mrs. Markoe looked up at him. She wore a huge black

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hat. It cast so deep a shadow across her face that her expression was barely visible. She stood with her back to the light. The ex-Ambassador faced it.

"Why?" inquired Mrs. Markoe. There was so positive a dignity in the carriage of her graceful head that the ex-Ambassador, for once in his life, feared his compliment might have been too broad.

"Because you are new," retorted he, remembering his foreign experience,—which had "made him quite odious," Mrs. Markoe was reflecting at this precise moment,—"and because you are true."

"Are not the members of the American colony both new and true?" demanded Mrs. Markoe.

"It would be unadvisable for me to confess it, had I been so unfortunate as to prove them otherwise," finally returned the ex-Ambassador, slightly discountenanced, for the moment, at so unexpected an onslaught.

"Quite so," replied Mrs. Markoe, thinking to herself, "I wonder what they proved you." "Be merciful to that poor orchid," she pleaded, softly, a moment later,—the ex-Ambassador's fingers were fumbling at the orchid in his button-hole. "I desire your advice concerning some matters connected with foreign household management, about which you, and you alone, can enlighten me. Come."

She had walked a little away from him towards the conservatory. She was looking back. "Will you come," she asked, "and look at Mrs. Conway's latest acquisition in palms,—if not a 'new,' quite the rarest, variety?"

They strolled across the threshold.

"Here at my right, please," urged Mrs. Conway with a welcoming gesture as, glancing up, she perceived Markoe at her elbow. "And so we are to be neighbors, and in Paris?" she said.

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"The most delightful of contingencies," murmured Markoe.

"What rare ability has that bad boy of mine ever displayed that you should flatter him to such an extent?"

"Hush," whispered Markoe. "I beg your pardon," as Mrs. Conway cast him a slightly astonished glance, "Jack, with you, is perhaps ignorant that full justice may not be done to our cause, are we suspected of strategy."

"Is it all quite fair?"

The question was brief. The splendid blue eyes were searching.

"All is fair in love and war. The American at home is perfectly equipped. Abroad he is more or less in the dark. We must not leave a stone unturned, Jack and I, to make ourselves valuable."

"To your friends? You are valuable." The statement was made with unusual conviction for a woman of Mrs. Conway's reserve.

"Pardon me. To our government. Nothing exists diplomatically until it has been proven."

"Thank you. I am deeply grateful. You will teach Jack much. But wherefore Jack? Although his mother, I confess I am at a loss to understand why you should have selected my boy to aid you in your campaign."

"There are worse boys," remarked Markoe, guardedly. The speaker's eyes were roving in search of their young friend. He was not visible. Jack had been called off, obviously, to attend to one of his guests.

"Worse? Yes. Idler? No. Less ambitious? Perhaps. Until now there has been nothing I could find which would rouse him. It has almost seemed to me at times that this"—waving her hand towards her guests and all the glowing, exquisite room contained—"has cramped and crippled Jack instead of enlarging his sphere, as I had in-

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tended it should ; that the one thing requisite which might have brought him out I could not give him ; and yet——” she sighed.

“And that thing is——?” Markoe leaned forward ; he was listening intently. His head was bent upon his chest. His arms were folded.

“Adversity.”

“We never can tell until we try,” vouchsafed Markoe, perfunctorily.

“Paris holds memories,” said Mrs. Conway, dreamily, a little later.

“Memories?”

“My girlhood dreams. And the empire I thought my kingdom in those glad young days, when I had all my life ahead of me, and my illusions were given full play ; and——”

She stopped.

Markoe, for an instant, thought she had been going to be guilty of a confidence ; but as her face paled a little, her lips took on a firm expression. She lifted her eyes. “It was the happiest and the saddest period of my life,” she said. “It seemed the end, then ; I find now it was only the beginning.”

“You married?” said Markoe.

“Yes,” she answered, quietly, “afterwards. One always marries—afterwards.”

In the conservatory Mrs. Markoe, after a prolonged interview with the ex-Ambassador, during which she had been egregiously bored, and he considerably enlightened as to the mutinous charm of the coming Ambassadors,——“a remarkably brilliant woman, my dear,”——he confided to the wife of his bosom, later, a confidence which she received with a sniff, Mrs. Markoe was moving from plant to plant with a rapturous expression, and giving vent now and then

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to little exclamations of delight. She had dismissed her cavalier under pretence of a desire to be alone a few moments for rest.

She did not see Jack Conway come through the doorway and stand transfixed at the picture she made. There was a tendril of bronze hair which had escaped from its place in the careless curls of her low coiffure ; it had fallen in among the sombre ruchings of her black gown. She wore no color but a bunch of scarlet geraniums she had carelessly fastened in her diamond-buckled belt. The twist of loosened hair was like a shaft of sunlight let loose across one shoulder.

Suddenly she looked up, and saw him. If the lines of his slight, erect figure were tense,—more so than usual,—she apparently had not perceived it.

“You !” she cried. She went on with her little springs and dartings here and there, like a bright bird.

“What luck !” ejaculated he, coming forward, just as though he had not been standing for five minutes in rapt contemplation.

“The flowers, you mean ?” she retorted, glancing about her in a peculiarly radiant way she had. “Are they not more desirable than anything else ?”

She had not said so, but he knew, with the aid of a quick sympathy which was born that moment between them, that she meant, “How much more desirable than all that noise and confusion inside ! How far worthier of consideration ! How peaceful !”

“I think,” returned Jack, “that we have one taste, at least, in common.”

He threw himself down on a settee, and looked up into her lovely face. It had more than a hint of strong character in it. The chin was determined ; the mouth, well governed ; the eyes had arching brows, and level lids.



TRANSFIXED AT THE PICTURE SHE MADE

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"Many," she answered, "is it not?" in a half-foreign fashion. "And now," she added, "that we are to live in the same city we must discover more ; mustn't we?"

Her cheeks were slightly flushed. The lace had fallen back from her slender, perfect arm. She lifted herself on tiptoe, to adjust a branch of trailing ivy running across a window above his head.

"Markoe is good to willingly widen my hitherto limited sphere," murmured Jack.

"Ah, do you know how good he is?" she acquiesced, unexpectedly. "Can you know—are you capable of realizing half how good he is?"

"Perhaps," he answered, a little astonished at the intensity of her response. She was generally silent, unless among her most intimate friends. She was a woman who required sympathy to bring out her intrinsic sincerity. Perhaps the enforced intimacy which was to come had already, in a measure, broken down the barrier which custom had hitherto invariably erected between these two in public.

"No, no," she added, hurriedly, as though fearful he was about to interrupt her eulogy, "you cannot know, until you have tried him, what a man he is,—I mean my husband. Staunch, a little autocratic, perhaps, but infinitely just.

"I have always regarded him in the light of an extraordinary success," said Jack, entering into her mood with the greatest tact. "He has proved himself my friend. If, within the uneven tenor of my unworthy way, I can reward him for the trust he has placed in me, I will do so."

"Yes?" she answered. "You will 'prove it,' you say?"

"I will prove it," returned Jack, almost solemnly.

"I think I should like to shake hands with you," she asserted, noiselessly moving towards him, for the first time in his life, of her own sweet will.

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"Here," said Jack, briefly.

He extended his hand, a nervous, handsome young hand, quivering with life, quickening visibly in its muscles and the coursing of hot blood through its owner's veins.

He held it out towards her.

She laid her fingers within it. They were bare.

"I think," she half whispered, in the same sweet, contemplative fashion, as though forming a delightful project, and, with it, the desire to cling to it, "I think we shall be friends."

Jack answered nothing.

He had enough to do looking at her. It seemed, somehow, a very solemn compact, this; a compact which might be far more binding than most covenants of a friendly description. He did not speak, because he could think of nothing more eloquent than silence.

"I need friends," she said, gently. "I have only Stephen, you know. He is so often—busy."

Jack nodded.

"And in Paris," she added, "I do not know my way about as well as Stephen does. He was educated there. I shall need, I wonder——"

She hesitated. Jack was looking at her with dumb eyes. Markoe crossed the threshold.

"Come, Kate," he cried, in his vibrant voice, in the tone that had been quoted, by a cynical bench contemporary, to "knock the bottom clean out of sentiment," "those cobs of yours are restive; we must get back to New York."

He glanced at Jack.

The young fellow sat in a despondent posture, both hands pressed between his knees. They had fallen there about two moments since. The one which Mrs. Markoe had clasped was folded under. Jack was holding it with an iron grip, after having looked it over closely, curiously.

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"Done up?" inquired Markoe.

Jack rose, and shook himself.

"Seedy," he returned, shortly.

He walked forward, then, and laid his hand on Markoe's broad shoulder.

"Stephen," said the young fellow,—it was the first time he had called his chief Stephen; Markoe started slightly.

"Oh, let me call you Stephen," pleaded Conway, with a slight quiver in his voice; "all our family does,—my mother, grandfather, and the rest." His features were twitching a little, as though he were struggling to control some profound emotion; it was a nervous face, at the best, and was often guilty of little, apparently uncommandable, disclosures of undue sensitiveness. "You have offered me the biggest thing you know of. I mean to obey your orders as grandly as the strength may be given me. It is the opportunity of my life."

Markoe shifted his shoulder, after he had contemplated him curiously.

"Don't be heroic until the time is ripe for action. Wasting powder," he advised.

"Perhaps," returned Jack.

He stood quite still as Mr. and Mrs. Markoe walked away from him towards the porte cochère, under which a pair of handsome cobs were fretting restlessly.

Across his mind there flitted a vague shadow of the substance to come, of the difficulties to be encountered, of his inexperience. He did not tremble at the task ahead of him—a task embracing, as he and Markoe already realized, some grave features. Rather he quivered to be in the thick of even an unknown fray, meeting subterfuge with grit, intrigue with caution. In his audacious courage, in his eager reach out into the unknown, in his indomitable desire to conquer, he left out of consideration an adversary which

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has paralyzed effort as effectually as death shuts down upon achievement. It stood at his elbow now, ready to stab him in all his pride of youth and energy.

"Au revoir," shouted Markoe as they drove off, touching the brim of his hat with his whip.

Then Jack ran forward.

It was too late to do anything but wave his hand. As he waved it a flush of color rose to his face. He remembered the fingers with which it had come in contact but recently.

As it fell he looked at it steadily. He turned it over.

There was a queer light in his eyes as he shoved it into an opening between the buttons of his coat, and held it there.

He would not see his chief again, it had been determined, until they all met in Paris.



CHAPTER V

THE FRENCH POINT OF VIEW

ONE morning, in the beginning of June, a messenger in private livery made his way hastily towards a long building on the left-hand side of the Seine, not far from Notre Dame. Arrived there, he parleyed a moment with an official who kept guard under the stone arch of a frowning doorway. After some severe questioning he succeeded at last in obtaining permission to mount the narrow stairway at the back of the big court to the right.

He scaled the first flight lightly ; indeed, so impetuous was he, charged apparently with a message of importance, that he sometimes leaped two or three steps at a time,

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thinking to arrive the sooner. But as he proceeded on his way, encountering broad and narrow corridors, and officials who peremptorily demanded his credentials, which, with a perceptibly obstinate determination, he refused to divulge,—whereupon, being laid open to suspicion, he at last whispered a name in their ears which made them fall back instantly with an enlightened expression,—his steps grew slower. With deliberation and slackening elasticity he stolidly pursued his way.

He climbed and climbed. He made straight to the right only to turn on himself, to climb twisted passageways to the left. He crossed another court, at last, and came into a wide, low-studded hall in which two or three officials, in the garb of the French government, stood at their posts. Among them was an old man wearing the forbidding air of a public servant in special employ. The messenger addressed him.

“It is a message from you know whom,” he whispered, “and I am to deliver it in person, and *au plus vite*.”

“My orders are that Monsieur Monod is not to be disturbed,” replied the old man, imperturbably, with the supercilious indifference of the transiently authorized. His name was Bénôit.

The messenger made an impatient gesture. He stooped forward to whisper in the old man’s ear the same name which had procured for him attention in past similar difficulties.

It produced a like effect here.

Bénôit started, placed his right hand, after having curved it cup-shape, to his ear, as though unwilling in so important a confidence to trust entirely to his own failing hearing, and then hurriedly bade the messenger be seated, while he retired to announce him and his errand.

The messenger, fretting at even so slight a delay, agreed

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to possess his unruly soul in patience while an effort was made to pierce the absorption of the listener he sought.

Bénôit disappeared.

The vast hall seemed sole owner of that silence which, some thinker tells us, is possessed of a roar on its further side. Officials hurried to and fro, in and out, at intervals, with the gravity on their countenances which indicates the conscious burden of municipal affairs.

At last, after three quarters of an hour's dull submission, by the messenger, to the law of the superior being whose time is valuable, Bénôit came leisurely through the opening made by the swinging of a green baize door.

His lined old countenance was puckered into an expression of puzzled wonder.

"He is very closely occupied," he announced, delivering a well-learned lesson with unction, "but considering that your message comes from —," he stopped, and nodded his head solemnly, "he says for me to bid you enter."

The messenger rose and hurried forward.

"Gently, gently," murmured Bénôit, shambling after him. He first threw open the baize door, led him through a small entry, and finally brought him into the presence of a very solemn-looking official in dark clothes ornamented with the *liberté, égalité, and fraternité* buttons of France. About this individual's neck was suspended a heavy brass chain. Hanging from it, and falling to the middle of his broad chest, was a seal. Its bearer seemed fully impressed with the gravity of his office.

He looked the messenger over, as though, considering him a villain of the deepest dye, he thus would check any attempt with concealed weapons. Then, throwing open a narrow, mulberry leather portal studded heavily at the border with wrought brass nails, he vouchsafed ungraciously, "Entrez."

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Disclosed was a room with one window, and, in the centre, a table on which were papers and writing implements, an inkstand, a blotting-pad, and, at the corner, a large revolving globe of the world. There were three leather chairs. There was one occupant.

The messenger entered.

The door fell to softly behind him.

Seated at the table, writing rapidly, was a man about forty years of age, in civilian's clothes. After a few moments he glanced up, and cast a pre-occupied look towards the messenger, as though so absorbed in the matter under discussion that he was barely capable of enduring an interruption. Then he said, suddenly, going on with his writing,—

“You came from——?”

“From Lamballe.”

The writer immediately flung down his pen. He bent his gaze upon the messenger. The messenger bore the look unflinchingly.

“I am to understand you are Lamballe's——,” the words arrested themselves in mid-air; the speaker apparently intended that his sentence should be filled up. The messenger was nothing loath.

“My master bade me hand you this package,” he said.

He unbuttoned his coat, withdrew a sealed envelope from a leather wallet he had carried inside, and delivered it in person, as he had been ordered to do.

The individual of importance, at the table, broke the seal and unfolded the letter. He withdrew the contents from the envelope carefully, after casting another attentive look at its bearer. He began reading the missive with marked signs of interest. His face flushed, slightly haggard countenance that it was, with hard lines in it, and a razor-like

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profile. With a quick, almost imperceptible motion he drew the globe of the world towards him, and with his forefinger rapidly traced out a portion of the corner which a geographer would have recognized as the quadrangular map of France. Then, pushing globe and letter from him, he let his head fall on his hand, and his thoughts into what has been denominated a brown study.

Some coals fell in the grate ; outside, a few rain-drops spattered against the window. A scurrying cloud quenched the sunshine for a space.

It broke forth again as the room's inmate leaned forward. Drawing pen and paper towards him, he began to sketch an uneven outline with the aid of what seemed an unbridled imagination.

Finally he threw down his pen in disgust.

Happening to glance up, he encountered the stolid gaze of Lamballe's messenger.

"You know the import of this message?" peremptorily. The messenger hesitated.

"J'écoute," vouchsafed his superior, encouragingly.

"I know," began the messenger, "that it is a subject which has caused monsieur mon maître some anxiety. It is the same affaire, he told me to inform monsieur, that cropped up some four years since,—il me semble,—the 'affaire internationale.' Monsieur mon maître had considered it defeated——"

"And——"

"Monsieur mon maître is disturbed,—he told me to employ that word,—'disturbed' that the question should have been opened again. But monsieur had received orders to consider it. Monsieur had but to obey."

"You left him at the palace," pointing in the direction of the Palais de Justice.

"Pardon. Monsieur mon maître had but just time to

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thrust the document into my hand before he retired last night."

"Écoutez ! Is he still chez lui?"

"Je le crois."

"Return to the house and tell him his presence here is desired most urgently, and at once."

The messenger folded his coat-flap across his chest carefully, fastened the buttonhole which had remained open, and, with a profound inclination, withdrew.

An hour later a man well ripened, in the prime of life, of a singularly commanding presence, with a pale, high-bred face, a pair of piercing black eyes, and a gray imperial, drove into the court in a high English cart. Throwing the reins to his groom he was ushered up a private staircase into the apartment of the individual who had summoned him.

The visitor was Ferdinand Lamballe.

He was attired in a gray spring suit of flawless cut and make. His head was surmounted with a soft, gray, felt hat. He wore an enormous white carnation in his buttonhole.

Monod was well versed in his business. He rose, as his visitor entered, and bowed profoundly.

"It is with deep regret, monsieur——" he began.

But Lamballe interrupted him by meeting his eyes with a peculiarly sweet smile and waving him to his seat. His was the gracious patronage of an acknowledged superior. It none the less conveyed the studied thoughtfulness of one born to command but never to oppress.

"The dispute is theirs, not ours," he said, concisely, relegating what might have seemed an act of undue pertinacity—a possible international complication—to its proper niche.

He seemed to be placing himself under an obligation to the man who had sent for him. His was that winning

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magnetism which acquires friends right and left through the sheer supremacy of forbearance. "Now this has come to the front again, we must defeat it," he added, seating himself.

The question had evidently been well digested by Lamballe before being passed on for consideration to a subordinate. He forgot that Monod occupied his present position rather by proof than by the chance of superiority.

"If I may venture to propound the question," Monod began,—“and, yes, I *may* venture,”—in response to Lamballe's glance of concentrated attention, “I would ask the wherefore of monsieur's opposition? His generosity is proverbial. He, without doubt, has full command of the matter to have so entirely decided upon the formula of contention in regard to it which we, he assumes, are about to pursue?”

“Stop,” interrupted Lamballe, in a clear voice. There was a harsh ring on the edge of it, as though its owner protested even more in his spirit than by aid of his words. “The cause of my opposition is purely personal.”

His listener permitted himself to look not only incredulous, but regretful.

“I acquired an implacable distaste for the American in my youth,” continued Lamballe, still with that harshness in his tone of which at other times it was devoid. “It still abides with me. Until now I have considered it needless to reveal a secret prejudice. Rather, however, than you should labor under a misapprehension, I herewith disclose it.”

The confession had evidently cost him something. His breath came in a labored fashion for a second or two. Then it grew regular once more.

“A petty definition, n'est-ce-pas, monsieur?” he demanded, a trifle ironically, as though himself aware of the

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narrowness his confession divulged. "But so it is. Perhaps I am not the first individual to allow a personal prejudice to strangle a wider or, say rather, a wiser concession."

He looked repentant, but absolutely decided.

"Understand," he continued, after a few moments silence, in which his listener had vouchsafed nothing,—a pencil rolled across the smooth green leather of a desk in the corner, and fell with a clatter to the floor,—“I consider I am doing my country no harm. Rather am I protecting her very positively from an uncalled-for nuisance.”

There was no answer.

"I am to believe you are of a like opinion?" he asked, then, courteously.

Monod stirred ever so slightly. His lips remained firmly compressed.

Lamballe looked at him piercingly. A light broke across his face.

"Speak," he cried. "Figurez-vous, I have often longed for a side-light on this issue from one of my own people." The manner was ardent, convincing.

A voice from the somewhat insignificant figure in the arm-chair spoke.

"It is with your permission?" it began, cautiously. Its owner's eyes, from under a pair of heavy, overhanging brows, peered forth as though dreading a coming storm with perhaps undue apprehension. His hand, thick, large, with stumpy fingers, the honest hand of an uncompromisingly self-confessed member of the *bonne bourgeoisie*, fumbled with a crumpled piece of paper on which it had drawn, an hour or so since, the semblance of a quadrangle.

"But speak."

"Then I would say the decision, monsieur, appears to us, from you, an unjust one."

"Why so?"

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"You have never hesitated to accuse us, as a nation, of mingling personal vanity with party prejudice; to state that we combine, singularly enough, the sturdy opposition of the ignorant with the enlightened views of the advanced. How is it that you, who clamor,—the word is perhaps too strong,—you who clamor for justice, who deplore our conservatism as compared with the progress of a quicker civilization, who never lose the chance to rail against our misuse or, rather, abuse of opportunity, in your books, in your dramas, with your acts, are guilty—I use the word advisedly—of so narrow a conclusion?"

"I own Carembourg."

All the pride of race shone from the piercing black eyes, the pride which makes of the lord of the manor a master. All the noble use of power for which this man was justly famous, all the recognition of the fact that possession is nine points of most laws—not all—stood declared in the firm retort.

"Monsieur, then, constitutes himself a——"

"I claim the privilege to sell my own land to whomsoever it pleases me," impetuously, "to ignore a proffer which stinks of an invasion, of positive vandalism. The law of gain is the curse of the coming race. The New World thinks, if it offers a larger sum than most, it may buy up our prejudices. It finds itself, for once, rejected. Naturally, charged as it is with intoxication, the ecstasy of the new-born drunk with life, it is nettled."

Lamballe spoke sharply. His meaning was clear. His eyes carried in their flashing depths the memory of a wrong. His listener, habituated to eluding side-issues, called him to order with his subsequent speech.

"The New World," he argued, "is inevitable, albeit at times too grasping, perhaps. The actual is the absolute. Monsieur is too wise to refute that. I say it were unworthy

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of a man like Lamballe to throw himself as a wedge between two nations which might, with mutual benefit, unite."

"And I contend this project is more or less of an oppression. The ingredient my chalk contains could be worked out and exported, as other properties have been worked and exported. Why acquiesce in the superfluous establishment, even if only temporary, of an army of foreigners who are odious to me,—a practical invasion,—whereas the other manner is feasible?"

"The 'other manner'? What is the 'other manner'?"

"The rental of the land during the process of removing the chalk; its ultimate importation, in its crude state, to be worked in the United States. The proposition was advanced and contemptuously refused."

"But that is not feasible; more, totally impracticable. Besides, if it were advisable, given that monsieur would cede the land long enough to have it deliver itself of its properties, the exportation of the raw material unworked would involve enormous expense. Labor is cheaper here than in the United States."

"Oh, that!" pronounced Lamballe, with a laugh. "You little comprehend the financial radius of the new world if you think it stops at the expenditure of a few millions more or less. The magnitude of their spirit of enterprise is almost incalculable. It savors of comic opera."

He spoke contemptuously.

"It seems to me," argued the voice from the depths of the arm-chair, with an obviously determined accent, "that their offer is a peculiarly generous one,—as it now stands. We cannot help but profit largely off the invasion alone, according to present propositions. The price to be paid down is a colossal one, taking into consideration the surplus expenditure which will be involved during the pit's excavation."

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"Generous!" broke forth Lamballe, with a sneer. "You do not know the American. He permits no sentiment to interfere where self-interest is concerned. In this he is, acknowledgedly, our superior."

His listener remained stolidly unconvinced.

"You say 'sentiment,'" he reiterated later, mildly. "Have you not confounded sentiment with sentimentality, monsieur?"

"Suit yourself. The entire proposition is insufferable to me."

"And why, if monsieur will still permit that I continue my argument in the case,"—Lamballe had risen; he was striding uneasily about the room like a white bear in his cage,—"why should generosity be denied the new world by you, the most magnanimous of men?"

"Because I know them, know them root and branch, up and down, round and about," cried Lamballe. "Assez, monsieur. The proposition to me is odiously distasteful. Tell our chief, from me, mind you, that the affair was settled, done with, dead, four years ago; that I totally refuse to reopen it; that what I said then I say now. I am as adamant."

He looked it, standing there at his full height: a princely figure, in stature unusually tall for a Frenchman, with that unmistakable air of race which exemplifies the memorable imprint of a kingly ancestry as to character as well as blood.

"One moment," the tone was dry, as though purposely drained of feeling. "You wish, then, that Germany should obtain the option of refusing or accepting this offer?"

Lamballe had lifted his hat from the table. He stood near the door adjusting his gloves.

"I cannot see——," he ejaculated.

"The frontier. It is but one step across the border.

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Prussian soil, to a foreigner, is as good as French. It is possible, albeit it appears monsieur refused to allow his surveyor even to confirm this statement, that the chalk may extend *across* the frontier. If this is true, and if the American discovers this, our cause is lost."

There was a pause.

"The invader," relentlessly pursued the voice from the arm-chair,—its occupant had not risen,—"*malgré lui*, is but human. He wants, too, his own way. I have been informed he will get it. He has not threatened," in answer to Lamballe's flashing look of annihilation. "Rather he has reopened the attack with courtesy and surety. My impression is that this time he has his weapons ready; that the man who backs the present motion is of totally different calibre from the man who backed a similar enterprise four years ago. He——"

"Well?" urged Lamballe, still contemptuously.

"I think he intends to win."

Lamballe, with a proud smile, turned towards the door again. He evidently had not swerved an inch from his prejudice.

"The man's name?" indifferently.

"Markoe."

Lamballe buttoned his gloves. He made no answer. One Anglo-Saxon word, it was obvious, was the same as another to him. They were, one and all, abhorrent.

Monod rose. "France will be grieved to consider you thus contemplate thwarting her interests, monsieur," he said, quietly.

"France!"

"She must so consider it. I was ordered, not a week since, to inform you of this truth, if you concluded to pursue your evident, your most regrettable, intention."

"France!" cried Lamballe. "Is it to France I am to

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sell my land? No. It is to this vandal. It would be the irony of fate should I treat, if only for a short period, with the race which is the most displeasing to me. *Que voulez-vous, Monod?*" He spread his hands wide, with an expression of despair. He was at an utter loss, it seemed, to disentangle his interests from so lamentable an exigency.

"Cannot you sacrifice a mere personal prejudice?"

"No," responded Lamballe, "a thousand times no."

He looked arrogant, but the pained anger in his eyes, like the fury in the eyes of a wounded animal, was not so; rather it betrayed the consciousness of an unhealed wound, a contingency publicly disallowed within Lamballe's charmed sphere. His had been, so the world considered, a triumphal progress; and the world's judgment is the only judgment which counts, after all. What does it matter if a man's heart break in the progress, so long as he appears to have won? Was he, Lamballe, to be attacked at last in his profoundest, his most loving conviction,—his passion for his country?

"Consider, monsieur——"

"I have considered. My answer is, I am not to be bought."

"Ah! But did your adversary know you as you are, you are to be won." The Gallic love of sentiment was advancing with alacrity.

"To be won?" repeated Lamballe, with a queer, unseeing smile, almost the brave, blind look of the condemned. "*C'est selon!* Give them my answer, Monod, between the teeth,—straight in the teeth, remember. Lamballe is not to be bought."

"And if they choose to read between the lines?" cried the tormentor's voice behind him, as he strode towards the door and out into the passageway.

"Tell them, even then I fight to the death," called back Lamballe, loudly, from far down the corridor.

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That night a message, with a government seal, was handed in at 63 Avenue Marceau, the residence of the United States Ambassador.

"It's war to the knife," it read—it was a single line, but the two men who perused it knew it to be the signal for immediate action—"it's war to the knife *unless* France can be forced to intervene."

"Jack," said Markoe, "you are due at Carembourg. I'll remain here, and meet Lamballe."



CHAPTER VI

A DEFEATED HANDICAP

"CAREMBOURG," began Markoe, in a low voice, "lies in a valley. There is a swift little river runs through here to the left, as I understand. In this corner," pointing to a map of France with a billiard-cue he had obtained in an adjoining room, having gone there to detach it from its bracket for the purpose, "are the chalk strata we are so anxious to acquire. The deposit is stated to be the largest in the world. What you will have to do," turning towards the eager, listening face which was bending over his shoulder, "will be to take our surveyor with you. Burgess is the man selected. When you have mastered the situation return here to me and report. Lamballe inherited Carembourg from his maternal uncle, who profited very largely, in a back-hand fashion, by the indemnity demanded by Bismarck at the time of the Franco-Prussian war. The dividing line, in his case, was drawn, luckily enough, just the other side of his possessions, which, unlike his neighbor's, escaped confiscation."

"And the bed of the river?"

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"Is chalky, too, perhaps. Across the frontier is Alsace-Lorraine. Curious how two distinct principalities may be separated by a purely imaginary line. However, as regards the propinquity of Germany's possessions my information is deficient. That is your business. The Carembourg valley is a rarely beautiful one," terminated Markoe, "and I heartily envy you your trip."

"I feel like an explorer," ejaculated Conway. "I am what the English call 'keen' for it, notwithstanding my departure takes place before either the Grand Prix or the Duchesse's ball."

But these gayeties were evidently devoid of the attractiveness they might have offered some weeks before to the vigorous young fellow who looked to-day well worthy of the confidence placed in him. His eyes had steadied. The sensitive lips were tightened in a firm, strong curve. The color, a trifle paler, was bronzed and even. The spirited head was chiefly remarkable for a width between the brows, which hinted of unusual concentrative force.

"Beware of Lamballe!" broke out Markoe, with a subtle smile. "It is said that he never sleeps,—his friends even suspect him of an eye in the back of his head——"

"Superfluous," incredulously, and with a fine contempt.

"That his servants are many and powerful; that he oversees his vast possessions untiringly,—in person as often as possible. You will find an exceptionably good inn at Carembourg. Keep your tongue between your teeth and work silently, you and Burgess. If you must speak, remember there are more flies to be caught with molasses than with vinegar."

The Ambassador was smiling broadly by this. It amused him to preach a policy which he rarely practised.

"I will visit Carembourg as an artist," serenely remarked his trusted aid, "and take Burgess along as my factotum."

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"Poor artists are not generally provided with factotums."

"This one shall be in the form of an even more indigent relation," humorously. "We will set forth daily with our paraphernalia. It will ostensibly consist of palette, brushes, colors, and an easel. It will be, in reality, a kit of the necessary tools. At night we will return to the inn fagged out."

"Lamballe's minions are many and powerful," cautioned Markoe, with emphasis.

"There is a servant known as determination, and another called silence. They are more than discreet," retorted Conway.

The door at the farther end of the room opened. A radiant figure stood disclosed.

It was Mrs. Markoe. She had but just returned from the Opéra Comique, whither she had gone with a party chaperoned by Mrs. Conway. She wore a gown of some soft, diaphanous, white material which disclosed her superb neck and arms. She came forward with her forefinger against her lips, an astonished look in her almond-shaped eyes.

Her opera-cloak, which was lined with black satin, made her dazzling skin seem as white as snow.

"Jack! You here?" she exclaimed; adding, "and I left your mother not twenty minutes since with the assurance that you returned from here to the Avenue d'Iéna immediately after dinner."

"No," he answered, quietly. He was looking towards her stolidly, with a peculiar expression.

"Instead?"

"I remained here for marching orders. I have received them. I take my departure to-morrow. Perhaps it is just as well, since my train leaves before ten A.M., that I bid you good-by now," he said.

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She looked back at him with great, unabashed, and startled eyes.

"Now?" she stammered. There was a little shocked strain in the suddenly faint voice.

Markoe had been closing his desk after disposing of some valuable documents he had consulted. He turned the key with a grating sound. His back was towards them.

"I will bid you God speed," he said. He strode towards Conway and, lifting his right hand, placed it on his shoulder. Then he glanced towards his wife. "Order up some edibles, Kate," he suggested, heartily. He bent and kissed her lightly on the forehead. "Give the young one a bracing send-off. I am utterly worn out, and will turn in."

His cheery voice came back to them as he crossed the threshold and closed the door after him. They heard his firm tread echoing down a far corridor.

"I will!" cried Mrs. Markoe.

She flung her cloak from her, and flew across the room to obey her husband's bidding. She placed her finger against the electric bell.

Then she turned. Her eyes, still with that unconsciously startled look in their wide depths, flashed from one corner of the room to another until they found the figure which was bending over her cloak. It had stooped, lifted it, and folded it carefully, and, after a pause, had laid it across the back of a fauteuil.

"It doesn't matter," she said.

"A pretty cloak," he answered her. The tone was dejected. The attitude? He stood with his head thrown up as though, having registered a vow, he intended keeping it.

The footman came to answer Mrs. Markoe's summons.

"I desire some supper served at once," she said.

"Oui, madame." He vanished.

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She crossed the room and threw herself onto a low seat near the piano. She clasped her slender hands across her knees. Her face a little bent forward, her eyes, still haunted as though by a distasteful apprehension, looked out ahead.

"An interesting place, Carembourg?" she inquired, as Conway hesitated.

He came across the room and stood before her. The mantel-piece was behind him. Over it hung a copy of Correggio's Madonna.

"I wonder if you know what the last three weeks have been to me?" he began, impetuously.

There was a silence.

She glanced at the lovely face above his head ; such a perfect woman's face in its absolute purity and utter self-forgetfulness, she thought.

"Have been to you?" she repeated, lightly.

"The happiest weeks of my life," he said.

It was a statement which he felt must come as inevitably as his departure. The words had echoed through his mind and heart ; their meaning had penetrated his soul for thrice seven days. They would out now. They said themselves, almost.

"You will have many perfect hours, I hope," she returned, very gently, still with her lifted gaze upon the face above his head. The picture seemed to stand between her and something which was threatening to envelop her ; something which was perilous, sweet, and yet regrettable. Was it regrettable? Was it not rather, she wondered,—the thought stabbed her like a poisoned dart,—what would she do without this something enveloping her? It seemed to her, now, that it had been with her, in all its intangible, delicious charm, for weeks.

"No," he was answering, before the unbidden thought

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had shaped itself entirely with her,—the response to his own statement. The retort to her benevolently expressed desire for his future happiness came slowly, sadly, as though heavy with the bitterness it carried. “Those weeks will never come again,—God help me !”

He was looking straight at her. The slender, tense, tall, young figure, the vivid, nervous face with its compelling gaze, the spirited, high-bred head which she had come to look for in every gathering she and he had attended of late, and at which she had even been the bright, particular star. The eyes,—oh ! how she wished he would stop looking at her so !

She walked about the room a bit, turning a flower away from the light here and straightening a book there.

Then she stepped towards him steadily, and allowed her own eyes—such placid, limpid things, with their piquant, arched brows—to fall upon him. As they met his there came into hers an expression of faint bewilderment.

“Tell it to me,” she pleaded ; “I can see you are in love. It is but meet,” she added, slowly, firmly, after an intense pause, “that I should know her name.”

“You ! Her name?”

He had turned his eyes away now. He was looking down as though studying a figure in the carpet at his feet. His face was pale, visibly wan. There seemed to fall cavities into the cheeks, a greenish pallor about the compressed lips. She had never seen him pale before.

“Yes,” she insisted : then, with solemn emphasis, “am I not your friend—and Stephen’s wife?”

Conway was silent.

Some carriages rattled by, rolling towards the Arc.

The door swung wide, after a distinct knock, to which Mrs. Markoe responded, “Entrez.”

The footman entered with a tray. He set it down on a

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stand, and spread the table under a cluster of tinted lights in one corner of the room,—a table against which the glittering glass and old-fashioned silver stood out brilliantly from a background of neighboring feathery palms.

“Woodcock,” announced she, brightly, “and champagne. Ah ! ’twas Stephen who thought of this.” Then she added softly, “Stephen !”

Conway had not altered his position by the mantel under the brooding gaze of the Correggio Madonna. But he heard her.

“Come,” she said ; “and now,” as he seated himself, “I am going to give you a scolding.” He lifted his sombre eyes. She continued, brightly, after lifting a piece of woodcock from the platter before her to his plate, and handing him a napkin, and pushing his champagne flute towards him, “What business have you to grow despondent before victory ?”

“Victory ?” he repeated.

“To be sure. You certainly are not going to admit of defeat even in your own mind. The conqueror, in all things, is he who determines to vanquish.”

He was silent.

“I think,” she continued, audaciously, her head on one side,—she had been nibbling at a wing ; the light fell across her charming face as though it loved to linger there and caress it,—“you must tell me all of it, Jack.”

“I cannot,” he replied, at last, with difficulty.

“Not tell me ? Are we not then comrades ? Is our compact forgotten ?” winningly, and, oh, so sweetly, as she gracefully raised the champagne to her lips and bade him drink “to victory !”

“Listen,” he began, finally, after he had set down his glass, and dried his lips with his napkin,—there was a look in his face she had never seen before, an old, worn look :

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some lines she did not remember were at the corners of his eyes. "If I tell you a secret, I have disclosed to no one before, will you help me?" His eyes, those burning, hunted eyes which seemed to see, aye, and feel, to-night, the heat and burden of the day and *not* to recoil from it, met hers fully.

She looked away.

"With all my heart," she answered, softly.

He raised his glass again, and drained its contents to the dregs. Then he set his chair back a bit.

"What would you say," he asked, "if I told you that I loved a woman who could never love me?" As he said the words, as though forcing his lips to lay bare a wound, he winced visibly. Then he pulled himself together again perceptibly and went on, dully, "I love a woman hopelessly."

That was all. It was evident that the recounter of this simple story, old and pitiful and hackneyed, considered he was telling something entirely new, a relation which for unmitigated sadness would ever remain unmated.

Mrs. Markoe had bent her eyes upon his firmly, as though bracing herself, when he began. When he ended, the tiny lace handkerchief, which lay in her lap under the cozily appointed supper-table, had assumed a curiously distorted shape. Almost it looked as if it, too, had winced.

"I should say," she answered, coolly—her tone was unsympathetic to a degree, as though unrequited love were far from her, because she could not, or would not, understand it—"that you had been unfortunate; but——"

He interrupted her harshly, bitterly. "'Unfortunate!'"

"Wait. That you had been unfortunate, but that time heals everything, and that some day, oh," at his impatient gesture, "*perhaps years hence,*" in answer to his withering

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look of utter incredulity, "you *might* recover, and love again."

"Never," he said. "That shows how little a woman can gauge a man's heart."

"Is it so much more loving, then, than a woman's?" she asked, with unexpected scorn. "Since you say your love is hopeless, why not seek to forget it?"

But as she heard herself giving forth the brave words nobody knew better than she how hard they sounded, how unelastic, how futile, too, in the present emergency.

"I would not wish to forget," she heard him responding, earnestly, "rather I would—keep—it as it—is."

His eyes—such miserable eyes—were devouring every line of her face, her hair, her little, scornful, classic nose, the hand and arm which lay so carelessly across the table, so perilously near his coat-sleeve. "I would loathe myself," he burst forth, hoarsely, "did I ever forget her. She is matchless, perfect, and," almost with a groan, "unattainable."

"Ah! That's it," she cried, with a forced laugh, "'the unattainable!' The acme always of a man's ambition! And if you attained, perhaps you, even you, with all your exalted sense of chivalry, with all your old-fashioned ideas of conjugal congeniality, you too might neglect the little daily tendernesses for which we women—starve!" She stopped abruptly.

To her consternation, he was looking at her with yearning, pitying, awakening eyes.

"Oh, do not look so serious," she cried, hastily, still with that strain in her voice which was so foreign to content; it had been taken on not only in this latter portion of her wild little speech. "I am not talking of my own case, only of other people's. Stephen is all that any reasonable woman could desire. And so your love is hopeless?" she

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said, after a few moments' pause, in which she too had drawn a little back from the supper-table, and had looked up at a clock whose pendulum was noisily swinging near her. "I am so sorry."

Then, as the import of her guarded speech was with him, he stood quietly, having risen.

She pushed back her chair, and leaning her hands upon the table before her, lifted herself erect. Somehow the movement seemed an effort. She began speaking in her every-day voice, the voice of the spoiled woman of society who positively declines to lose her beauty-sleep in an argument over so fleeting an inconvenience as an unfortunate love-affair. "I wonder what our friends would say could they see us now,"—her features were sparkling, mischievous, bonny. "Imagine Mrs. Markoe, the American Ambassador, talking seriously with Mr. Conway, at midnight, over a hopeless love-affair!"

She knew that ridicule can slay the veriest tragic situation on earth. With unhesitating nerve she played her best card. He started as though he had been stung.

"I will go," he said. "You have dismissed me."

She laughed. "Well, not quite that, is it?" she asked, teasingly; "and yet"—She pointed towards the clock.

"I will bid you good-by," he said. The words were firm. He was standing with his coat over his arm, and his hat in his hand. He had marched with measured tread out into the hall, and had quietly detached them from the hat-rack as she stood watching him silently.

The room, in that moment of his absence from it, had been oddly still.

Mrs. Markoe had not stirred an inch.

Breathlessly she watched the man's figure turn from her, detach the light overcoat, and turn her way again.

Her way!

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A thought had lit up her mind of an engraving she had seen on the dingy wall of a country hotel somewhere near Mount Desert,—a mother lifting her anguished face to kiss her soldier boy farewell: such a pitiful countenance, its predominating characteristic, unmitigated resolve.

She glanced at a mirror near her. Slowly, very slowly and tranquilly, with the calm which is born of desperation, she mastered the expression in her own face. Had it too been anguished? Why? She, who did not believe in presentiments!

But the face that Conway's eyes fell upon, in despairing fashion, as he turned for the last time in her direction, was radiant and quite self-possessed.

"Bon voyage," she said, brightly, laying her hand in his extended one with just the correct measure of cordiality admissible between the matron and the boy; "bon voyage, and a safe return."

"I am grateful."

Before she could prevent him he had bent and kissed the slender fingers in his grasp.

She drew back.

"A French custom," she remarked, coldly, "which I consider meaningless."

Her heart smote her.

He was regarding her with the dumb gaze of a tortured animal.

"Good-by," he said, as though quoting from her book. He was, in truth, past questioning her manners or her methods. All he saw was the debonair, sparkling countenance, which had made his happiness complete once in a sunny past that seemed slowly drifting out.

"To victory!" she cried, with a thrill in her voice.

At that moment he turned again to look at her.

She was standing behind him on the threshold as he

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started to descend the stairs ; a vivid, graceful figure, the spirited chin well up, the sweet eyes fixed, and strangely still.

“ Ah! But if it is defeat?”

“ Defeat!” she retaliated, incredulously ; “ we are of the stuff which will not brook defeat.”



CHAPTER VII

A VERY GREAT LADY

THE Duchesse de Launoy was giving a breakfast for a young poet, her latest protégé, when Lamballe entered, an hour after his interview with Monod. Condorcet was a timid young fellow whom the French capital's social leader had discovered in an attic, at Courbevoie, on her rounds as a mother of mercy. She had picked up the sheets on the common deal table before him, after listening attentively to his halting story, and had cast her penetrating eyes over the words scribbled thereupon.

The sonnet possessed unusual merit. The Duchesse was a trifle sceptical as regarded genius. She had run across so much notoriety which had no background but influence, —often her own too sympathetic influence. She inclined involuntarily before this ragged-sleeved nobody with the record of abused midnight oil in his pallid cheeks and faded eyes. A few days afterwards she had sent a liveried servant to bid him come to her.

It was the day of his life.

He recalled years afterwards that enchanting morning in his famous patroness's airy breakfast-room ; its frame of aviaries and flowering plants ; its ceiling in pure white bas-reliefs of Cupids wreathing roses about an angel face. The

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beauties in his sonnet were publicly enlarged upon by an individual who was on the top rung of fame, a lion who, at a hint from his hostess, took his precious time to tell her poet, in no guarded style, that he would give his right arm to be able to write as perfect a specimen as the one under discussion. For glow and conviction, for construction, for metaphor, the great writer declared it to be a chef d'œuvre. Where, he asked, had Condorcet wooed his muse?

The poet replied, in a trembling voice,—that select party read between the lines, an acquired habit with the pulse-hastenings of the Western hemisphere,—something to the effect that the nature which has been repressed invariably lets forth its message to the world—a wandering shade of oversoul—a child crying in the night.

When the lad paused as though out of breath, Marguerite de Launoy sighed unaffectedly, dried her eyes, and smiled.

Then Lamballe came in.

His hostess bade him be seated, and listen to her poet's story. But by this Condorcet had shrunk into himself. He suddenly realized the contrast he presented with that magic interior. His inspiration deserted him. He drooped visibly. Suffering becomes second nature; it may not be thrown off at command even by a poet who has for years struggled unseen, unlistened to.

So the Duchesse temporarily drew the kind scrutiny of her guests away from his flushed countenance, and began talking with Lamballe upon the topic of the day. All Paris was agog over the great dramatist's coming play, which was to be presented a day or two later at the Français.

"It's a go," he stated, succinctly. He had been superintending rehearsals for a month. He looked fagged.

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The Duchesse, who understood him better than any one of her generation, recognized some disheartened lines in his frank physiognomy.

"A la bonne heure," returned she, in response to his disclosure. "Do you hear that, Vodillet?" she called down the table to a long-haired individual who was arguing violently with a deputy next him. "The première is to be the night after to-morrow. Ferdinand states its success is assured."

"I have secured the best talent the Français can offer," added Lamballe.

"Paris knows when her favorite child has proved his worth," proudly asserted the Duchesse. "The theme," insistently, "tell us of the theme."

"The old story," vouchsafed Lamballe. "The story of the humbug of this epoch. The fatuity of poor human nature presuming it can superintend the will of——," he stopped. He cast a quick, suspicious glance at the listening faces about him.

The little circle, which consisted of eleven men and women, had turned involuntarily towards this magnet in their midst. The faces were alive, each one indicative of a nimble wit.

"As opposed to the will of——?" urged the Duchesse.

"Of a Higher Power," answered Lamballe, reverently.

There was a chorus of protests.

"But what would we do without science? Answer me that, Ferdinand."

"And progress,—the progress you advocate?"

"And the law of preservation,—where does it come in?"

"What heresy have you swung your plot on now, mon ami?" demanded the Duchesse in her sonorous voice, after the tempest of questions had died out.

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"The heresy of medicine. The fallacy of cure in general as opposed to the will of God in particular. The presumption of man's belief that he may conquer what the Redeemer commands. You know Caracci?" The physician named was conspicuous for having declared himself the discoverer of an infallible cure.

"Yes!" shouted Vodillet, with emphasis. Caracci had failed to heal the great journalist's son of an inherited malady, after declaring himself supreme in this speciality.

"I have imagined Caracci himself in the clutch of an invincible disease," stated Lamballe, tersely.

"Admirable," remarked a woman in one corner. She had quitted the table. Her elbows resting on a bracket back of her, her head thrown forward, she cast her eyes up rapturously towards the sun-flecked ceiling. She longed for the unfolding of a plot—a rarissima avis in Paris—which might be fraught with novelty.

"It will create a tremendous sensation," asserted the Duchesse, with sang-froid. Her practised acumen rose to an emergency with relish. She had always claimed that Lamballe enjoyed throwing his glove to the dogs of public opinion. When the agony was over, he stooped, picked it up, brushed off the dust, rearranged the pieces, and utilized the abominable treatment it had received as a lesson instead of an assault.

With one delicate hand she was holding a bunch of grapes. In her other, the right one, she was plying a pair of grape-scissors in the form of a stork. She placed the bunches, when she had done detaching them from the main stem, upon a silver dish, and bade the maître d'hôtel distribute them among her guests, some of whom by this time had risen. Others were lighting their cigarettes.

"What is the title?"

"'Avoided.'"

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"We are to suppose, then, that Caracci 'avoids' the inevitable?"

"You are to suppose that Caracci avoids, through a merciful death, the revelation of his own too pitiful failure."

"Ah! It is a *pièce à clef*," mused the Duchesse. "In a *pièce à clef*," she explained rapidly to the poet, in response to the unworded question in his listening face, "the main rôles are assumed by the players in as exact as possible a similitude of the living characters' habiliments and idiosyncrasies. It requires a dramatist of very unusual capacity, of tact, and of vast wit, to do this thing. Lamballe is the foremost at it. He cuts deep."

"The method is a new one, is it not?" inquired the poet, timidly, in his thin, high voice.

"On the contrary, it's as old as the hills," remarked Lamballe. "Are we not, nous autres thinkers, constantly seeking to solve the problem of life? Why not try and guess the riddle of death?"

"But death is extinction," implored the poet, in his flexible voice, with distended eyes.

"Yes. Then why object to it, enfant? There are losses all through our lives far more agonizing than the loss of breath."

"I know," answered the boy, very low. The whole gamut of his past sufferings stood revealed in his answer. The conviction in the face of Lamballe's outspoken fling at falsity, that he was one of the forgotten of God and men, was with him once again in its fullest force.

Lamballe contemplated him piercingly. He wore customarily the introspective gaze of the thinker. Trained observation revealed to him the famished lines about the poet's lips, the hollow curves in the delicate temples.

"Hand over that sonnet," commanded the dramatist, peremptorily. The boy obeyed. Lamballe perused it, scept-

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tically at first. As he read his attention grew. His expression softened reverently. His black eyes with their powerful brows, eyes which mocked and jeered, mostly, because of having mastered the fact of the ineptitudes of life, grew profoundly earnest.

He glanced across at the Duchesse, who was watching him and the poet with the brooding look of a mother bird guarding her nest.

"My old friend, thou has found a thing which will live," he pronounced, deeply moved.

"You know my belief," she responded, quietly. "The gifted human being is an instrument straight from on high."

There is, perhaps, as much rejoicing in heaven over a soul that repenteth as in France when a new genius is discovered. If there is more, it is because the quality of the listening hosts is chosen, and the spurious in achievement, happily, an unknown quantity.



CHAPTER VIII

THE UNDERTOW

SUBSEQUENTLY, when the Duchesse's guests had departed, Lamballe's reserve crumbled away. He seemed all at once endowed with a devil which would out. His speech, habitually more trenchant than that of most of his contemporaries, sprang up and flamed. It was the thoroughly equipped output of the man who works, rejoices, and observes to a superlative extent. But to-day its predominating accent was a death-knell to peace. He flung out cynical syllogisms, imagining his case, proving it, and watching its throes with fine irony. He rejected his chosen confidante's protest, to her gentle dismay,—that protest

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which had hitherto made way with him, of human nature's foremost duty to itself. He stormed like a poisonous wasp desirous of inserting its sting in every corner of the stately room to which they had withdrawn that they might uninterruptedly exchange confidences.

No hint of hers touched him ; no venture seemed equal to coping with his violence. At last she sat silent, watching him pitifully, as he paced to and fro clamorously pursuing an imaginary contest against wrong, perfidy, intolerance. Oddly enough, this accomplished thinker appeared to have suddenly forgotten that his attitude expressed all three.

The force of the Latin race expends itself more by protest than in action. His present mood was a new one with Lamballe. His watcher took note of it uneasily. Where was the calm of the high-minded philosopher, the cool contempt of the critic whose standard had been tampered with ? Here was an individual wasting his energy where it would have commanded respect by silence.

His brows, like shelving roofs, knit up in a fretwork of deepest lines, his eyes two jets of sombre flame, scorching, feverish, his nostrils dilated, his figure erect, the muscles stiffened as though ready for action, his head thrown up as if to the last striving to prove itself victorious, he strode with palpable bitterness the way of the soul which claims its just due.

His listener waited patiently. She had a refutation ready for each cutting dart the speaker let forth, a remedy for every revulsion of feeling. First and last she felt contempt for a cowardice which proclaims its impotence aloud. She knew that to voice a pain is to reject its most soothing balm,—that of secrecy.

But still she waited.

And at last, like a tired child who has spent his wrath

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wantonly and comes home to be punished, he threw himself upon an embroidered stool at her feet and was still.

Only then did she lay down her knitting, about which her slender white fingers had been creeping like mice. In the act she let her hand fall against his shoulder and felt with keen sympathy the rigid muscles through the cloth of his coat. The veins in his temples stood out like whipcords.

“The old pain, Ferdinand?” very pitifully.

“The same. It is my lot to be yoked with insufficiency.” He was looking back at her with stormy eyes, as though swept by a hurricane which had uprooted many a living thing in its mad might.

“I do not understand. I never have comprehended your unrest. Life is full for you. You are famous. The world is at your feet. What could man ask more?”

“I thought the thing was dead,” he murmured, desperately, “until to-day. Am I an infant to be stirred like this, by memory, when the daily facts which move most people pass by me like a breath across a mirror? Will my time never come wherein I shall suffer no more, just wait, like a tired child, my turn to be stricken once for all? What a coward I am, *chère amie*! At a breath from the past my blood curdles, my muscles stiffen, my judgment is muddy. My vaunted will,” ironically, “becomes a shadow, substanceless, like paper. I am sick and tired.”

He drew one powerful hand across his forehead. His face was haunted, gray.

“But your work,” murmured the Duchesse’s pained voice. “Our need of you. Think of the hundreds whom you feed and clothe. You exhale the breath of new life into your people’s nostrils. Is not that consciousness enough to insure content?”

She had dropped her knitting-needles, which for the past

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few seconds she had vainly striven to manipulate efficiently. She gazed at Lamballe with pleading eyes.

"Fame!" he went on. "What is fame in the place of love? Success! What is the success one acquires in the face of the success one has striven for and failed at? Charity! Aye, I have been charitable. Where is the charity that should have been meted out to me?"

His was the face of an avenging angel by this time. He was asking questions of the air, of the room, of the frowning pictures in their sixteenth century frames upon the walls.

"Ah, old friend, the world thinks that success is what I crave, success in being a consoler instead of a participator in the joys which have been denied me. What am I? Merely the spur to other men's content,—their friend, perhaps," hopelessly. "Don't you understand now? I have looked at happiness all my life 'through other men's eyes.' I want my own."

The tall figure had begun its striding up and down again, down and up, with heavy, heedless feet. The face was haggard; its lines furrowed. They seemed to have set deeper in this last half-hour's unbridled fret.

"But there are many women even yet," began the Duchesse, timidly.

He checked her instantly with a frown. "There are usually three women for a man: the woman whom he desires and who is not desirous of him; the woman who is desirous of him and of whom he is not desirous; and the woman of whom he is desirous, who is desirous of him, and whom Fate decrees he may not have."

"And for a woman there are but two men," returned the Duchesse, dryly; she had been a widow for thirty years, and was an accomplished philosopher: "the man who desires what he may not have, and the man who dis-

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regards what is his. Perhaps, who can tell, he may be one and the same."

"What brought it near you?" she inquired, later.

"A mere chance. The case came up four years ago. It concerned my deeply rooted prejudice against abandoning Carembourg to a horde of vandals. It broke out again to-day. The American is at our door again. I shall not let him in."

"The American! Was she then an American?"

"You did not know?" he answered, feebly, in a shaken, incredulous fashion.

"I!" ejaculated the Duchesse, in the utmost astonishment. "How should I know?"

"But it was chez vous," he asserted, in that queer, dazed manner which was so pathetic.

The Duchesse rose. She let her knitting-needles fall unheeded to the ground.

"I beg of you, Ferdinand," she cried, authoritatively, "what is this mystery?"

"There is no mystery," he returned, instantly. "It was Madeleine Farragut."

"Madeleine Farragut!"

She lifted her hand now, in a blind, stumbling fashion, to her forehead. Madeleine Farragut! Her friend, her life-long friend! "You speak of those days, years ago, at La Vallière?" she whispered.

Her voice came to Lamballe as through a mist.

"La Vallière? Yes," he answered, slowly, caressingly. His memory was throbbing, too. "Yes. It was at La Vallière. Strange, you never knew."

"No," returned the Duchesse, faintly.

She was seeing many things which she had never even suspected before: the cause for forgotten enigmas in her brain; certain questions without answers; answers to stray

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interrogations. The Duchesse had all her well-ordered life been fond of quoting the sins of omission to be greater than those of commission. She had sinned, indeed. How blind she had been ; how much more than blind ! Bête ! Was there nothing now that she might do ? A sudden light beamed across her face. She drew herself up. She crossed the room, steadily, to where Lamballe stood with his back to her. He was staring blindly at a golden crucifix on which a silver Christ, the piteous thorn-crowned head of peculiarly exquisite workmanship, hung, wearing its sublime expression of heroic martyrdom.

“And you have carried that scar in your heart all these years ?” she asked.

Lamballe made no answer.

Her eyes were full of tears. “But it is almost unheard of !” cried the Duchesse. Then she added, as though to herself, “And we are told that man is faithless.”

“Would that he were,” breathed Lamballe, huskily.

“My friend,” she said, laying her hand against his arm. “Come, seat yourself near me, and tell me of your grief. That poor heart must be congested.”

She drew him onto a sofa beside her.

“I cannot,” he muttered, after a little, in a stifled voice, springing up. “Let me tell it my own way.”

He again began pacing the floor rapidly, stopping at intervals as though to concentrate all his strength upon stating as minutely as possible the color, the feel of the period he was striving to put before her. But he visibly recognized his words to be shadows, providing for substance vapor instead of flesh and blood. The words alone were pallid, however ; the subject-matter was radiantly alive,—the vital era of a man’s first love.

LAMBALLE'S STORY

CHAPTER IX

LAMBALLE'S STORY

"You must imagine her en toute beauté," he began, hoarsely. "Fancy me, too, young and hopeful, not the worn individual you see now."

He checked himself a moment. Then he continued,—

"It was when you instituted those hawking parties in the forest of La Vallière after the manner of Francis I. I can see the spaces in the woods between the bay-trees, which stood in clusters, where the sun shot through its yellow bars of light. I can see, too, the more ancient portions of the forest, where the gloom was cool and still. I can see her, cannot you? Her hair was a wonderful color,—like that of our impératrice. Her profile was the chaste outline of Diane. She had the delicate features, the rose-leaf bloom, of the women of her race. I can picture her with the morning in her face, and again in the moonlight when we met to kiss and clasp and vow. Such vows! Was there any proof of faith she did not give me? Was there a feat on earth I would not have attempted for her?"

He drew his hand across his burning eyes. His features quivered. With an effort he controlled them.

"How I loved her! I remember the world took on a new meaning for me. Up to then the bird's songs had seemed shrill and tuneless. They now were symphonies rehearsed for our benefit. The sun grew warm. The sky stretched, a perpetual blue, off towards a limitless horizon which I longed to reach. The world was made of gold; a poem, telling but one sweet story,—ours! Her father

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had been sent out to represent his home government. He brought her, his only daughter, with him. You remember?"

The Duchesse nodded. She could not speak. She, too, was wandering in the fastnesses of those woods of hers, disporting with her bidden guests, witnessing their enjoyment, with the then new agony of loss in her heart which she had so bravely determined to stifle with constant prayer and useful deeds. How strangely still her grief was to-day, and patient! She had almost grown to love it,—a friend that, never changing, held in its depths fidelity, illusion, fulfilment,—the souls of love and life.

Lamballe stooped and plucked a piece of drooping hyacinth from its stem. It grew in a wrought silver jar at his elbow. He contemplated the tiny, bell-like flower wistfully. Then he laid it down. The gesture said it had ever been his portion to put sweetness and light away from him.

"I don't know how it came about, just," he murmured, after a little. "Ah, now I remember! One day I doubted. It seemed too much to ask! She, to love a brute like me! She knew. Out of her womanly mercy she bade me doubt no longer." His voice took on a wondering, joyous note, merely at the recollection.

The Duchesse was gazing at him still with those wide, moist eyes, pools wherein the tears seemed glistening, held back against the white lids, awaiting their own time to fall.

"She loved me," continued Lamballe, solemnly, a thrill in his voice, which had all at once grown rich and ringing. "In that day she was truthful. It was my day, our hour. No one had taught her to be mercenary—yet. We learn that," very low, and with supreme contempt. "She was unspoiled. We loved each other like grave

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children who reverently accept the munificent gift proffered them with a full realization of its value. If in my young madness I forgot for the time to consider her interests, that was but momentary. The thought slowly framed itself as the sense strengthened in me of the great responsibility I assumed in agreeing to shape and carry through her happiness. I bore a great name. That was all though. The estate was heavily encumbered. I was practically penniless. I held a position under Gontran in those days. You remember? His secretary. He was a government official with vast power. My position came to me through my father's influence, before his death. Gontran's was an uneven, fiery nature, which broke out in queer places. One day, in a fit of rage, he dismissed me. Then I awoke to facts. I told her how rash I had been, how we must wait ; that I could not ask her to waste her youth thus, but that I would be patient all my life ; that I must go away and work ; that here all my energies were stunted, dwarfed,—my great love for her made me practically impotent. She said that she had money in her own right, and that I must take it. I was too proud. Since then I have learned that he who accepts nobly is far finer than he who gives ! At my refusal she threw her arms about my neck and implored me, like the child she was, to remain with her,—not work,—anything rather than leave her. I refused. Her father had been obstinate as regarded our union because of my poverty. I was wounded to the quick. I determined to prove my mettle. I often think, now that the years have sped, that did poor human nature know enough to hold fast its most sacred joys, to submit with less resignation to loss or change, perhaps it would not expend its forces in after years in imaginings of what it might once have done. Surely we have the right to happiness. We are brought up to believe ourselves

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ignorant of what is best for us. Why then are we given hearts?"

He was looking into vacancy, transfixed, apparently, at the sombre colors of his own destiny.

The Duchesse saw a tear fall across her cheek from under the lids of her half-shut eyes. She had closed them meekly. It was more than she could bear to look upon Lamballe's working face. She neither moved nor spoke.

"My light," he broke forth, harshly, "went out. I think perhaps she was coerced by those about her, a worldly, pleasure-loving set, her friends. She was so young and rarely beautiful. I have never known; that has been the hardest part, to have never even known. At St. Petersburg I worked to still the throbbing fever in my blood. The impatience I suffered was a living force. They said it would not be long before I proved myself invaluable. I knew that would command a price, always. Her letters came. They were girlish, unchecked; the outpour of a loving woman's loyal heart. I have them still. At night I take them out and read them over and over. I can see her face, her lips, her eyes. I can hear her voice. She 'loved me so,' they read." Here his voice broke off short. He made a fierce gesture, and stumbled on. "She wrote the 'days' were 'long'; they had 'no sunshine' in them. They were 'not the old days.' It was 'not the same world!' I, at last, had leave given me. I wrote her I was coming. Such a letter! It almost scorched the covers in which it was enwrapped. 'When I reach you,' it read, 'remember nothing, mignonne, but that my arms are hungry for you, my lips dry, my heart drained!'"

The Duchesse's face was drawn and white. The agony in Lamballe's voice was as live as though the cause for it stood close.

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"When I arrived they told me she had gone. Her father had been called back. His term was over. She, his only daughter, went with him. Not a word,—not a line. Even then I never doubted; I was so sure she loved me. I sent a cry after her: Why had she gone, and wherefore? My trust was absolute. There came no reply. Then, one day, I knew. I read she had married a man three times her age, with money. And she had been rich,—I loved her,—I was young!"

"And you did nothing?"

"What was there to do? My dream was dead. My bird had flown. The sun had vanished from my sky. It never has returned. Ah, perhaps a pale ray, sometimes, now and again shines on me through the blessings of a poor woman or the smile of a child. I am not one of those men, *chère amie*, who can patch up a memory and call it truth. I wanted the best of life. I lost."

There was a long pause.

After a time Lamballe's voice continued; it had regained its steadiness, the trenchant tones he assumed as his disguise reasserted themselves. "I have my love for that murdered dream with me always. In latter years I have considered that enough. She chose; not I. She, without doubt, suffered the consequences, poor child, as we all must suffer when we choose dross instead of gold."

"And you have forgiven her?"

It was the Duchesse's voice.

"No," responded Lamballe, decisively, without an instant's hesitation. His features took on a mortal pallor now. "Have souls the right to slay one another, and go unpunished? Think what it was to have the mainspring of a life broken, the hands shattered, the hours set at variance. Other men can fool themselves into taking what they can

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get, perhaps. I failed. That acknowledgment has never passed by me."

"And this—this is the source of all your bitterness, old friend?"

"Is it not enough?" asked Lamballe.

The Duchesse made no answer.

A man who elects to bear, unmurmuring, a wrong, to cloak his eternal ache with merciful deeds, to work out others' salvation with death at his heart, is truly noble. Despised love may turn and sting itself; it may, again, bear richest fruit, but the renunciation demanded of it in the latter mortal process is ten times more acute than the travail induced by natural laws.

"I thank you for your confidence," murmured the Duchesse, softly.

Lamballe gripped her extended hand. "I am weak," he acknowledged, sadly.

She lifted herself to her feet, and placed one approving hand against his powerful shoulder. "There are weaker things than love of justice," she stated enigmatically, adding, "I think love is yours, Ferdinand."

He shook his head.

"The love of your fellow-men."

"A poor apology for home and wife," he whispered, painfully.

She did not contradict him.

Some moments later she changed the subject. Their conversation caught up the theme of the coming play. After exhausting that topic, the Duchesse's annual fête came under discussion. The Duchesse recounted a story of a rival great lady who had dared to say she would outdo her; whereupon the Duchesse had ordered three orchestras instead of one, and had substituted a wing at the end of her banquetting hall, which was to be a marvel of ingenious contrivance.

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Lamballe suggested some novelties which his listener agreed to adopt, and, finally, refused to divulge the costume in which he was to appear.

She finally desisted.

"But I will discover you, never fear," said she, shaking her finger at him.

He rose. He had promised to be present at Bagatelle as umpire at the polo match. Already his carriage had been announced.

They walked down the long room together, out into the great hall, which, dome-ceilinged, let in through colored-glass panes patches of crimson and violet and amber.

"There will be a number of new costumes," exclaimed the Duchesse,—she was like a child; her fête had taken a vivid hold of her imagination, "and the ordinary duplicates of old ones, I presume. The feature which promises the most amusement is that none of your sex will be admitted, unless masked."

"Vivandières," remarked Lamballe, beginning to count off on his fingers as he drew on his gloves, "a folly or two——"

"Oh, as for that, follies always come in threes, I have been told," laughed the Duchesse.

"The customary shepherdesses, and all the queens."

"Tiens!" cried the Duchesse, "I had almost forgotten! There will be a rarely perfect Marie Antoinette."

She stood with her strong head thrown back, looking at Lamballe with kindling, benign eyes. They held a hint of light malice which he could not take time to understand. He saw it, however. It nettled his curiosity somewhat.

"Marie Antoinette?" he returned. "And is she not always beautiful and perfect? Would it be indiscreet were I to ask, does she come with or without her head, chère amie?"

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The Duchesse was observing him narrowly, it might have been said with a slight apprehension.

She brought the corners of her eyes together in a peculiar fashion as she retorted, "With her head this time. What if—remarques-tu, I say only *what if*—she won your heart, Ferdinand?"

"Impossible!" protested Lamballe. He was descending the broad staircase leisurely, buttoning his glove. He looked back over his shoulder. The purple light from one of the windows above lay across his face.

"Take my advice," warned the Duchesse, with a tremor in her voice, "and beware of Marie Antoinette!"

"Is my name Lamballe," cried he, with mock self-sufficiency, "that I should fear my Queen?"

"And yet," said the Duchesse, full fifteen minutes afterwards,—she stood reflectively where her guest had taken farewell of her, her gown lifted between her thumb and first finger, her foot on the landing of the stairway which led to her private apartments, and which she began slowly to ascend,—“and yet,” she murmured, “I can think of no better way to tell him that Madeleine Farragut is in Paris?”

"I will not inform Madeleine of our interview," she decided that night, after having cogitated all day.



CHAPTER X

THE FRONTIER

THE 9th of June, at Carembourg, in the Wallindorf valley, two masculine figures wended their way across the fertile fields. They left behind them an inn which nestled in a hollow a few paces from the shabby railway station.

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They pursued their route silently towards a point in the landscape which commanded no view and little beauty.

The Wallindorf valley stretches, a broad green ribbon, between tufts of hills that group like listening spectators about an arena of verdure.

The highest elevation is surmounted by a quaint château, architecturally a masterpiece of the early Italian era. The king who bestowed upon France a historical new birth imported his outlines, with his hobbies, from the prolific south.

Once arrived at a point in the picturesque landscape, the younger man swung his leather sack off his shoulders and, whistling softly an air which a participator in the doings of the active world might have easily recognized to be a popular refrain, an echo of the music halls in London, Paris, and New York, steadied his easel in the long grass. With an attentive eye fixed severely ahead of him upon a stretch of road,—his chosen position commanded a view of the inn, the railway station, and the castle above it, the main road, and the cross-roads at the corner,—he proceeded to brush in a picture which for impressionistic realism was unique.

Happily, there were no severer critics about him than a carter with his yoke of oxen, and a dog pursuing his zig-zag chase after the butterflies. These were either too ignorant or too indifferent to cast on the stranger more than a shifting glance as they passed.

The second individual's peregrinations it would have been more difficult to explain had one set out with that acknowledged purpose. Whereas the artist, serenely contented, whistled now and then gayly, stopped his work at intervals to throw himself down on the side of the road for a smoke, wandered idly towards the dashing river, and sometimes fashioned a rod of a drooping willow bough

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which he tore unhesitatingly from the mother stem for his own piscatorial delectation, the elder man, a rough-looking specimen in tweed and knickerbockers, possessed of a pair of shrewd, humorous eyes, a long upper lip, rough hands, and a lined, tanned skin, leathery and sunburned, which told its own story of wind and weather ignored, darted about like a ground-sparrow, hither and thither, tirelessly. Squatting, kneeling with his face close to the ground, lying flat in the shadow of the forest many yards off, punching, pummelling the ground with his fists, and then rising to walk leisurely with measured tread across from the point in the road towards a clump of woods out of which some oaks, in stately fashion, lifted their feathery tops towards nature's roofing, the odd being seemed imbued with the demon of unrest.

There was a long, low line about half a mile from the cross-roads corner, wavering, uncertain, blood-red in color. Like the knife-blade crest of a tossing sea it rose and fell at intervals under the light breeze blowing. From a distance this line resembled a streak of life cutting its inevitable way through nature, uneven, listless a trifle, but clear.

Nearer to, the crimson line disclosed itself, a double row of wild, red poppies with black centres.

It marked the frontier between France and Germany.

It seemed an emblem of past warfare ; a gory memory which had left a scar which throbbed and multiplied.

The elder man followed along its uneven length for a mile. Then, with a puzzled expression, he returned to the point he started from at the cross-roads and made his round again. From the tree at the corner of the road which stood sentinel over a gravel path distinct and well-marked in its frame of living green, up the little incline to the left, over across a gully which ran out of sight, swallowed

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up in the forest, around back of a slight elevation and again to the tree, coming this time from the right instead of the left with measured tread. Like a tragedian, repeating his lines while stringing his gestures onto his periods, he kept his lips moving.

At intervals he called something across from where he stood to the artist, who immediately,—it was astonishing to see with what alacrity the idle young fellow accepted any interruption, no matter how intently he appeared bent upon his own amusement,—at his companion's low, clear, concise words, whipped a small note-book from his pocket and jotted down some numbers furtively.

The second day, after slinging his leather sack off his back, unpacking it deftly, and disposing his artist paraphernalia conveniently, he withdrew from the bottom of it a clumsy instrument with a wooden handle and two heavy pieces of iron crossed at the end.

This he gave to his companion silently.

That personage took a firm grip of it and placed it against his shoulder, after having cast a glance behind him and another towards the little village nestling under the shadow of the castle at the foot of the hill back of the inn.

He then made off with it, walking rapidly.

But no sooner was he within range of a scrubby-looking brushwood, which edged the corner of the roadside, than he drew a long string from his pocket and some pegs, which he whittled sharp at one end with his knife. Fastening the string into the earth with one of the pegs, he began deliberately pacing off distances with his feet.

The artist was restless.

He stood, with both hands in his pockets, casting doubting looks at the sky, which was no longer gray but thick, dun-colored.

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The inn, under the thickening clouds, made a black dot against a murky background. There was a thin line of smoke far off towards the horizon, which bespoke the passing of a locomotive to, or from, the great centres of the earth.

Carembourg, in the Wallindorf valley, is but eight hours from Paris.

Conway's thoughts were not with the sturdy figure in the underbrush to-day, but rather on the crowded boulevards with their interminable hum, in his mother's entresol on the Avenue d'Iena, or even at the United States Embassy.

"What were they all doing?" he wondered.

His mother at this hour—he drew his watch from his vest-pocket : it was half-past four—was at the Grand Prix. He could see the sloping pelouse dotted with bright-hued toilets ; hundreds on the Grand Stand. He pictured mentally the Champs-Élysées with its multitude of spectators gradually thickening and spreading ; the long rows of horsechestnut-trees like giant bridal bouquets shading the holiday costumes of the women and the more sombre accoutrements of the men. Later would come that heterogeneous scrabble towards home, the return from the races, which exemplifies more thoroughly than anything the struggle for life, or supremacy, or both.

'Twas the night, too, of the Duchesse's ball,—the fête of the season.

All Paris would be there. Paris of the Faubourg ; Paris of the green-room. Political Paris ; sporting Paris. The vast salons would be thrown open, as they invariably were once a year, for the throng which, in mask and domino, would come there, to dance and frolic until dawn.

It was odd what he had come upon inadvertently in regard to that ball ; he who was so utterly indifferent to the

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inner machinations of the set which so large a proportion of the world seeks to know, the set with which he had been conversant all his life. He knew it through and through, he thought, wearily. Society was the same thing the world over: a selfish, self-seeking, self-indulgent thing. The same in France, Conway had discovered, as in New York. It fought with all its weapons for place, and, once arrived, proved itself in so many instances unworthy of the prominence it had bled to attain. Was it its insatiability that made it seem so insignificant?

He had been strolling past a play-house in the rue Drouot only yesterday, an hour before he had quitted Paris.

A clown stood in the doorway. Paris knew him as well as his gags and its excesses. Mariotti had set the jaded capital by the ears with his jokes, which were two-edged with cynicism and truth.

His hands were plunged deep into his pockets. His countenance, unwhitened to-day with a spurious effigy of purity illuminate, was open, and bland as a child's.

Conway stopped to chat with him.

"And the ball," he asked, "the Duchesse's fête? In what costume do you go, Mariotti?"

He put the question more as a poser than through curiosity. He fully expected the retort might embody a counter-thrust out of the mouth of this original babe and suckling who revered no man.

Mariotti bestowed a queer look upon his fashionably clad interlocutor in response.

"Monsieur mocks! Mariotti is not bidden to the ball of the Duchesse," he vouchsafed, cautiously. "But, would monsieur learn a secret, I can tell him one which Paris would give a fortune to know,—but first, does monsieur attend the ball?" It was evident this specimen of mixed ancestry had been copiously imbibing.

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"No. I shall be miles away by that hour. I leave Paris to-night," Conway returned.

"À la bonne heure ! Know then, monsieur, that Mariotti, and Mariotti alone, knows of the costume to be worn by Lamballe !"

"Lamballe attends the ball?" cried Conway, astounded. He had imagined his adversary of graver ways and means.

"Always. Monsieur Lamballe is everywhere. He has nine lives, I tell him,—of a cat. He is of Mariotti's most faithful clients." The simple fellow made this statement with the air of a monkey wooed by the moon.

"What will be his costume?"

"That of a harlequin," whispered Mariotti. "It is to be an exact copy of my costume. All Paris knows it. I created it for this past season's extravaganza. I take it through the provinces this summer."

"And?"

"How monsieur is bête ! Cannot monsieur fancy the intrigue? Lamballe goes as Mariotti. Mariotti stays at home. In sum, monsieur, Lamballe lays aside, for the time being, his identity and becomes the simple clown."

What a pity he could not have remained in town, to pierce his enemy's disguise through this disclosure so artlessly betrayed ! What a chance lost ! What a revelation neglected !

But he had his orders, and must obey them.

The train, two hours later, conveyed him and Burgess in the direction of Carembourg, Lamballe's secret unrevealed.

Night was falling. The ball was coming on. He could see her entering with the diplomatic party.

Ah ! En masque to-night, my lady ? And the costume, an outspoken freak. The costume of Folly, in cap and bells. She could grace it.

Mrs. Conway would go as Marie Antoinette.

THE FRONTIER

Stephen? He had refused to be present. "Masks and dominoes are made for children," said he.

"But she would be there, all grace and charm and lightness. The cynosure of every eye. Her winsome face aglow with mischief. Her radiant eyes? What eyes they were! so full, so frank, so sweet. Heavy lids. High-arched brows.

And she was Stephen's wife.

He started as though stabbed.

The clouds were blackening overhead; thickening, lowering.

The day was to be short. The night was falling.

Ay, falling! Shutting him in.

And he was here and she was there.

Stephen!

Suddenly he saw it as it stood.

Like the writing on the wall, the thing which had been gradually forming shape and substance stood in all its unutterably sweet might confessed.

He! Conway!

Why, his mother knew: mentally he was groping haltingly, a soul lost in the dark creeping on its hands and knees in search of light. God Himself could vouch that he had always possessed a higher sense of honor than most men, through some subtle forestalling, a recognition of an issue to come before it was made evident to the common herd. To be sure, he had suspected himself, at odd, brief moments, of an apprehension, an unspeakable dread of the inevitable. But he had sworn, when his turn came, that he would fight, struggle against, conquer.

Coward! Knave!

In college his cool courage had been proverbial. Even in childhood his contempt for lesser things had been held almost unparalleled among his comrades.

A NEW RACE DIPLOMATIST

But this !

This insidious, wanton thought. This desire ! This yearning which fastened him in the whole fibre of his being. It was undoing him minute by minute, hour by hour, heart-throb by heart-throb.

What moral implement had he which would fight it back ?

None.

He knew, as he stood there, stood as though stricken by the lightning which was already darting like a glistening viper across the thundering hosts which rallied thicker and blacker above, that he was impotent to down an antagonist which would not fight back ; a fretting beast which, endeavor as he would to drive it on the curb, seemed to experience a wicked delight in releasing curb and snaffle.

He was fighting slack.

Oh, for action ! The clash of arms ; the puff of battle-smoke ; a foe worthy of his steel ; a metal stronger and more forceful than his own metal. Not this skulking, shameful acknowledgment which must be concealed, maltreated, denied.

It came over him sickeningly that here was his opportunity at last.

Not the chance he had sought ; a thing with healthy blood in it, with clean muscles and sinews, of tissue stronger than his own, of mettle which would command his subservience, stir from his strongest depths adequate retaliation ; but a poisoned adder which, like a thief in the night, had fastened its fangs in his peace, and was slowly undermining him bit by bit.

He had met his foe. The obstacle which was to bring out his capabilities. He had wished for it ; reached out for it.

But a live, open-hearted, sturdy, decent thing.

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Not this. Not thus.

He must put her from him *because* he loved her.

It would be like tearing the delicate tendrils of a flower from off his soul and cursing them as vipers.

He was seated upon a stone. His head was buried in his hands. The sky grew black, thicker. The air seemed breathed up.

He felt a touch on his shoulder.

With a violent start he looked up.



CHAPTER XI

ACTION

BURGESS stood before him with a short pipe in his mouth, which he was sucking doggedly.

"I've found 'em," he remarked, laconically.

"Eh?" returned Conway.

Burgess continued, unmindful of his dazed glance.

"There's four stones, sir. Over to the east there near the river; one to the north, a bit of distance; one to the south well up over them hills, and the other——" Burgess stopped. He eyed his listener deliberately.

"The other?"

"You're settin' on it, sir."

They both looked down as the younger man sprang to his feet.

He had been seated on a square stone of shot granite, well hammered into the soil. It had nursed—as mother nature so often nurses unsolicited her children—some wild flowers,—daisies, clover, buttercups. The little weeds had lifted their heads unobtrusively. Sentinels, they were standing guard over their self-chosen sponsor.

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On the top of the stone, chiselled clearly, unadorned with arabesque or workmanship, was the letter L.

"Do you see that line of smoke, sir?" spoke up the elder man, after a pause. He was pointing towards a funnel of smutty-looking vapor which was uncurling its shadowy length slowly against the blackening sky, near an edge of the woods, about a quarter of a mile off.

"What, then?"

"It's Lamballe's men, sir, or I'm a liar."

"Have they seen us?"

Conway had thrown down his brush as Burgess spoke to him.

His expression was alert; his eye calm and bright as he stooped, with a heightened color, to pick it out of the dust into which it had fallen.

"There's a couple uv 'em, sir. I can't tell whether or no the furriner claims the privilege of livin' on his own land all the year roun' or not." Burgess wore a humorous smile. "I take it they're Lamballe's men, sir. I run up against one uv 'em not a quarter of an hour sence,—devil take 'im. I sported the bland smile of the suckin' babe. I had seen 'im comin'. 'Who's there?' says I, startin' back. He was a little feller, with a sharp look that cut like a knife. He said somethin' under his breath, sudden-like. Then he stopped short. He made off, sir. I kep' on me way. I had been takin' bearin's. I had time, luckily, to whip me string back into me pocket. All at once another figger sprung out o' the grass at me feet, in green, sir, velvet, like the color o' the ground. 'Good-mornin',' says he, in English."

"Did you answer?"

"So struck was I with the attack, an' in me own tongue, I answered before I knew what I was doin'.

"'Good-mornin',' says I.

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“ ‘A fine mornin’,’ says he, with a grin.

“ ‘Then I remembered it was late afternoon. I think he remembered it before I did.

“ ‘There have been finer,’ says I, takin’ in the cut uv his jib without appearin’ to do so. He was measurin’ me with the benign expression of a mother superior contemplatin’ the mornin’s milk.

“ ‘On your travels, my good man?’ asked he, with a laugh.

“ ‘It’s a matter uv some miles, sir,’ says I ; at which he laughed again. Then I passed on.”

“ ‘Was he old or young?’

“ ‘Middlin’.”

“ ‘Short or tall?’

“ ‘Tall,—very tall. About your height, sir.’

“ ‘What was the color of his hair?’

“ ‘Gray.’

“ ‘We’re in for it,” remarked Conway, with a new light in his eyes. He seemed to be slowly acquiring steel.

“ ‘You mean——?’

“ ‘I think it was Lamballe.’

“ ‘He had no beard, sir.’

“ ‘He may have shaved it off.’

“ ‘He’s too late, sir.’ The statement was made with triumphant brevity.

“ ‘You?’

“ ‘I have me bearin’s neat an’ sure. I know me ground as well as the weasel his nest. I can fix me dimensions on a piece o’ paper with half a day’s leeway as clear an’ fresh as paint.”

“ ‘But the chalk ! How far does it extend ? You haven’t determined that?’

“ ‘Leave that to me, sir. What’s the night fur?’

A NEW RACE DIPLOMATIST

The aforesaid conundrum was propounded with a look of cunning which was consummate.

Darkness fell. By five-thirty it was black as Erebus ; a soaking night with frequent gusts of wind, which swept across the helpless valley like warring hosts. The river roared, tossed, leaped, like a pulse in its last fierce flicker for supremacy.

The little inn was lit up as soon as the dark declared itself. Its host, a cheery individual, his wife, a pretty, rosy-cheeked Alsatian, wearing the butterfly black bow across her level brow, which bespoke her unwilling subjection to the Teuton invasion, invited his guests to a repast, the succulence of which was undeniable.

There was a soup first *à la bonne femme*, which for delicacy of flavoring could not have been outdone by a Joseph or a Paillard. It was followed by a fried sole dished up with a sauce which melted as vapor on the tongue, while tickling, like the odor of roses, the mental palate. After this, potatoes from the tiny garden at the back *en papillotes*, a whiff of the flower in their flavor, peas sweet as sugar, in absinthe-green coats, haricots verts with the strings left on them Parisian-wise,—the strings which tell their own story of taste,—and a chicken *à la Marengo* abloom with the roseate hue of the tomato, and snow-banked with rice. Topped off by the crowning glory of the country-side, a pudding stiffened with apple meringue and vanilla, with a *vin du pays* sauce, and galettes hot from the oven, the dinner was a feast for the gods.

The fruit was redolent of blossom and sunburn. When three kinds of cheese had been administered—Brie, Roquefort, and Gruyère—and the amber-tinted coffee served, Conway and his surveyor leaned back in their comfortable chairs—elbow-worn in their wooden arms—content.

The host withdrew discreetly. None knew better than

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he the hour to let digestion woo the mellowing faculties of his guests.

Their dining-hall was small with a door opening onto the road. A door cut in the right wall disclosed a bed-chamber which Conway occupied.

The temporarily constructed space had been converted into a cozy interior for the benefit of itinerant guests.

The silence was broken abruptly by a whistle from the locomotive, which sped through the valley like a messenger of evil.

"It's the down train," remarked Conway. "The train for Paris is due in thirty minutes." He glanced at his watch. It was quarter of six.

He yawned.

"I'm off, sir."

Conway looked up.

Burgess had risen. He was detaching his coat from a peg where it had hung against the wall. An instant later he was tugging at his boots, which had been drying by the fire,—a roaring one at the end of the room. The warmth was not ungrateful, owing to the soaking dampness which the storm had brought in its breath.

"What?" Conway glanced at him with amused eyes. The fellow's energy was incorrigible, he thought.

"I'll finish what I have to do, sir."

"Not a night like this, surely?"

"We've no time to lose." The retort was conclusive.

The dreaminess faded out of Conway's eyes like smoke from a tornado-swept horizon. Across them jetted a fork of new life. Purpose, that daring light.

He rose. He marched across the room and steadily confronted Burgess just as he was turning towards the door.

"You think there's danger?"

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"Some."

The sententious precision of the reply was indubitable.

"Our work is on private land, you mean? Well, what then?"

It was the cool, unconvinced epicureanism of the landowner who has too enforced his rights.

"We're nothin' more nor less than poachers, sir, in the present instance. There's game preserves in them parts I purpose burrowin' in to-night,—preserves well ticketed against the invader."

"What of it?" incredulously.

"There's a law in France that can imprison a malefactor three months fur the same."

There was a grim conquest of local technicalities in Burgess's statement which adequately informed individuals had been unwise to ignore.

Conway's face brightened. The light which had been growing in his eyes set them aflame,—an after-calculation's conflagration suddenly put upon a forethought's track. Fire to tow.

"Let me go."

The words burst forth unguided, almost as if unthought. They argued an acknowledged force at their rear which impelled them.

"You stay here, sir." The command was brief. Into Burgess's stolid gaze had stolen a dogged contradiction.

But the cool, smooth voice, the surveyor knew, had gone out forever with some other ingredients which, up to now, had formed the integral portion of Mrs. Livingstone Conway's only son. A new voice was in its place,—an organ with a strident ring in it. Real earnest.

"I'm master here, man. Come. Hand over those tools. We'll change places."

"Don't be unwary, sir," urged Burgess. His speech

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was not indicative of disrespect. It held the whine of the cur set to watch,—in the watching betrayed.

“Hand over the tools,” sternly. “I have been idle too long.”

The kit was handed over without a word.

“Now give me your instructions,” with determination.

Burgess measured the slender figure before him reluctantly.

“If you will do it, sir. You always were a young divil fur gettin’ your own way. Be cautious an’ the game is ours.”

“Go on.”

“There’s a gravelly corner over near the poppy-field, sir, where I stuck in one o’ me pegs to-day. If it’s still there all will be easy sailin’ enuff. If the wind an’ the rain has swept it away your work’ll cum harder. It’s the place thet decides whether or not the chalk extends into Germany. Pull out the peg, if it’s there, and dig down with this knife with all yer might. If the knife melts in, you’re on the wrong spot. If it’s gravel, and at first only lets you through, after some sharp digging, onto a substance as brittle as flint, you’ve struck the chalk. If the peg is not there, you must feel around on your hands and knees until you find the gravelly spot I speak of. You see the importance of makin’ sure of this point, sir?”

“Yes,” answered Conway.

He was pulling on his boots now, a thick pair he dragged hastily from his box in the adjoining room. He drew on his coat. He muffled his throat up in a scarf which came to his eyes, drew a soft hat well over his forehead, and slung the wallet, which contained a pickaxe, a pipe, some tobacco, a piece of string, and an old bone case-knife over his shoulder.

“Yer own mother wouldn’t know ye, sir,” exclaimed Burgess, admiringly.

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As he neared the doorway Conway looked back.

"Pity we aren't sure whether or no Lamballe is in Paris," he said, lightly. "'Twould save us a heap of manœuvring. Daylight is always daylight. Oh, I say, Burgess,"—he laid his hand upon the latch and glanced back across the glowing lamp-lit room,—“if, by any chance, I have not returned before morning, there's a telegraph blank there,” pointing towards his valise.

"You'll be back, sir," in a gruff voice, phlegmatically.

"Good-night, Burgess."

"Good-night, sir."

There came a gust of wind which almost swept Conway off his feet. He threw the door wide open and looked out.

The valley, a surging, tossing black wave, throbbing with unseen things, a pulse of the night beating out its life against a formidable enemy, screeched and rumbled, roared and howled, in its contest with the rain and wind.

A sheet of rain dashed into Burgess's face, standing far back from the door, as he did, impotent, his stifled will inert. He had been accustomed to obey all his life. The thought never occurred to him to rebel at the inactivity thrust so imperiously upon him.

The intrepid figure dashed forth into the warring dark. It vanished.

Burgess stepped forward. He closed the door.

With a yawn he seated himself and drew off his boots. His carpet slippers were donned again; the coat doffed, the dilapidated slouch hat hung on the wall. He walked towards the stone fireplace and threw a stick of wood into its smouldering depths. "As well to keep the fire goin'. It will dry Mr. Jack on his return," he thought.

The inn had been a stable once. The fireplace, an institution of some troops in time of war. Burgess seated himself after a careless glance back over his shoulder.

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Once, when the window rattled as if it would smash to pieces, he rose, walked forward awkwardly, as though the eyes of his young master were upon him, and peered forth. With a shrug, finally, he returned to his chair and stretched himself, his head thrown back, to sleep.

A piece of burning wood fell onto his coarse sock ; with an " ouch !" he kicked it off.

He heard the innkeeper call his dogs to order ; they were howling like a pack of fiends, lending their chorus of yells gratuitously to the increasing fury of the storm, which seemed to be whipping the seething valley into a tidal wave of revolt.

Mine host called cheerily from above to know if all was well before retiring. It was a question mouthed in Alsatian. Burgess guessed its meaning and answered, " Aye, aye," wondering, while he did so, if Conway would report before the inmates of the little inn were wrapped in sleep.

His intention was to remain awake. He reflected uneasily that perhaps he had not explained the ground—where he had been about to pursue his operations—as clearly as he might : that Conway, unversed as a man of his inexperience must necessarily be at taking note of landmarks to aid him in discovering his way, might wander from his path and get lost in the forest.

But as the fire blazed up and the roar of the storm soothed the surveyor's relaxing senses, he recollected comfortably that the roads were wide and well defined, that, albeit there was but the one hamlet between the hill and the castle,—the hamlet which in feudal times was the back door of the castle's need,—there was still that hut with provender within, a man, and perhaps a beast. Even the enemy would be preferable to total annihilation.

What a storm ! A perfect hurricane. The inn rocked like a helpless atom, a victim of its fury, which was surely

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stupendous. He seemed to be in motion. A song he had heard sung by a sailor, while crossing, at Markoe's order, came to him,—“Rocked in the cradle of the deep.”

The sun was shining across his face.

He sat up. Then, as his eyes sleepily and fretfully blinked, his fingers sought his watch-pocket and extricated his big silver watch.

Lazily he lifted it towards his eyes. He started violently. It was eight A.M.

He rose. He staggered towards the window, rubbing his swollen eyelids.

The valley was dimpling and glistening in a glowing flood of radiant sunshine. The earth seemed crowing with rapture over her ravishing new birth, rain-washed, wind-clean.

Suddenly he gave vent to an ejaculation.

Conway must have returned, and quietly stepped across the intervening space between the entrance-way and his bedchamber, fearful of awakening him.

He turned and looked across into the room beyond through the wide-swung door.

The bed had been unslept in.

The trunk, its tossed contents revealing the hasty unpacking of the impatient seeker, yawned as Conway had left it the night before. Burgess sprang across the floor and stolidly contemplated what he saw there.

The room was empty.

It was evident Conway had not returned.

THE RIFT WITHIN THE LUTE

CHAPTER XII

THE RIFT WITHIN THE LUTE

"AND I cannot prevail upon you to accompany me, Stephen?"

There was no response.

Mrs. Markoe stood on the threshold of her husband's study.

The Ambassador was intently consuming the contents of a home newspaper. The postman had delivered a batch of them some hours before. This was the first moment, seized with avidity, which had been his to utilize in their perusal.

"Stephen!" in faint remonstrance.

The Ambassador laid his paper down on his knee with a visible effort to disengage his attention from its contents. He removed his glasses from the bridge of his nose with the air of a person who had been disturbed by some foreign element, the nature of which he suspected, but could not precisely determine. This unwarrantable intrusion might be repeated unless met with and argued against.

"Stephen!" with exasperation.

"Well?" phlegmatically.

"Why won't you go?"

The Ambassador turned in his chair. It was a desk-chair: it revolved. As he twisted the unbidden thought flitted across his wife's mind that if determinations were built on pivots life would be possessed of infinitely more variety. Then came the after-thought, "It's a poor rule that can't work both ways," she reflected.

Before her husband's gaze—an absent, newspaper-

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haunted gaze—fixed itself upon Mrs. Markoe the thought had been dismissed.

It was eleven P.M. It was the 10th of June, the evening of the Grand Prix : the night of the Duchesse de Launoy's ball.

That the Ambassadors was attired in a fascinating *négligé*, all soft ruchings and billowy lace, her hair loosened,—a mass of somewhat dishevelled waves and curls, her cheeks like crumpled rose leaves ; she had been asleep, she was on her way to her room to adjust her war-paint,—was a detail unremarked by the Ambassador.

He had been disturbed. He resented it. He looked a protest. His manner expressed, "Haven't I told you once for all I wouldn't go? Why recommence the argument?" He was too well-bred to voice his grievance. He was not a boor ; far from it. He was a prominent citizen interrupted in the occupation which he enjoyed. The diurnal worm that turns is the newspaper-charged masculine whose inclination has been denied him.

"Ah, Kate," said the Ambassador, colorlessly. He was swinging his glasses about in circles, dangerously. The string made them jump, elastically, in the air. Was the string whipping out its owner's irritation thus?

"Yes—'Kate,'" she repeated, a little mockingly,—the drift was cynical, the tone was not,—"just—'Kate.'"

She stepped across the threshold. She slowly moved towards him.

The room was dim, delightfully lit with lamps.

As she came forward the shadows lengthened behind her. A warm ray shone from under a rose-colored lamp-shade onto her slippers. It crept up till it reached her knees. Still she moved forward. It attacked her shoulders, then lingered on her white throat, and then her chin, her lips, her eyes, her hair.

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She stood directly under the Ambassador's absent gaze with two cold hands clasped behind her.

She frowned deliciously. She spoke,—

“Oh, thou noble and distinguished representative of home government,” said she, with an inflection of faintest irony in her manifestly guarded tone,—her voice was flute-like, her manner a little uncertain,—“whence this indifference to society?”

“Be off, butterfly,” returned the Ambassador. “Haven't we been doing it *ad nauseam* for a matter of eight weeks? My record is made. I am as tired of twiddle-twaddle, gossip, fads, and tal-lals as a reprobate on sufferance. Go your way. Leave me mine.”

But she held her ground. Her chin crept up a little as her under lip fell in, like a grieved child's. It was evident the persiflage of her premonitory symptom was a faithful precursor of a graver attack. “Oh, astute individual! society demands of you but your presence, but your most egregious boredom. Yours is not to speak, nor to deny, nor to expound. Yours is to be. Your presence to-night will not only swell the list of the Duchesse's distinguished guests in to-morrow's newspapers; it will prove the United States has mastered the Faubourg. Come.” She extended both hands. There was a witching, half-startled look in her eyes.

“Your reasoning is faulty,” shortly. The Ambassador's hand was reaching out for the newspaper again. Mrs. Markoe saw this with a lightning glance and a swelling heart; she drew a short breath. “Masked, all men are only men. My presence is not of official importance to-night. To-morrow, perhaps, at that première of Lamballe's.” The fiat had gone forth.

He was still grasping out for the papers, turning his shoulder towards her to do so. But she had pushed them out of reach purposely.

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"Give me those papers, will you?" he said. He was tired of the subject already.

They were at her elbow. She silently lifted them, with a faintly contemptuous expression, between her finger and thumb; gingerly, as though the margins were primed with microbes. She laid them lightly in his hand. She drew back. Her lips were quivering very slightly; she bit them in.

"One moment," said a resigned voice.

It came from Mrs. Markoe. Her face was wan. Her eyes were as inscrutable as the Ambassador's own. Her fists were clinched in among the folds of her gown.

She had retreated to the threshold. "I beg your pardon," she interpolated, in response to her husband's surprised look. "What could there be"—he was, possibly, thinking—"more interesting than the news he had been perusing?"

"The coiffeur," said she. "He's waiting, you know. I will show myself to you before I go—alone. But, has it occurred to you, what will the colony say if it knows I go alone?"

"You'll be masked, won't you?" returned the Ambassador, cheerfully, in a relieved tone; "and devilish hot in the bargain," he added.

The figure on the threshold vanished.

The Ambassador appeared unaware he was alone. He read on. The footman entered and laid some letters at his elbow. He retired on tiptoe. The clock on the mantelpiece, a clock with a blue enamelled face, gold hands, and a double frame of rhine stones, the whole surmounted by a winged Mercury, tolled the half-hour, then the three-quarters, then the hour, then the quarter, then the half-hour.

The Ambassador perused the sheet before him de-

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lightly. Once he stopped, lifted his head, and listened intently. A carriage rolled into the courtyard below.

The sound it made was like the echo of distant thunder. He remembered his wife was going out. He frowned slightly. He rose and walked towards the window. He glanced at the clock. "These French things begin late," he said, aloud. Then he opened another paper, and was soon buried in its contents. The hum of the city grew thinner, fainter. Finally it seemed to die out altogether, with the exception of a fiacre which rattled by madly, the miserable steed galloping under the cruel lash of the Paris Jehu's notorious overbearance.

All at once Markoe became aware of a vivid light which made the black letters on the white sheet beneath his intent eyes dance. It roused him to a realization that something was happening.

He stirred. Removing his glasses, he looked up.

A footman had entered at Mrs. Markoe's instigation. The coolly darkened room, with its discreetly shaded lamps, had altered into a garishly illuminated place with every corner and console revealed. Electricity had done its work.

The Ambassador blinked. Then his eyes encompassed a masked feminine figure which stood in the doorway in a costume as paradoxical as a woman's heart.

On the pretty, tossed, reddish curls was a tricolored cap of pink and orange and green, made of odd little triangles of silk with loose corner ends, which bobbed saucily at the on-looker from unexpected places. Each corner was finished off with a rhine stone, in emulation of a dew-drop. In the shell-like ears were two huge diamonds. The skirts were short, disclosing two tiny feet incased in green satin slippers with pink French love-knots embroidered across the instep, the whole surmounted by two enormous oblong

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paste buckles. The creamy, dimpled neck and arms were unadorned. As if to make up for this deficiency—which betrayed a coquetry that was absolute—the corsage was literally encrusted with magnificent gems of every denomination,—emeralds, rubies, sapphires, and diamonds. The small fingers were covered with gems. They could be discerned sparkling under the silk mits which encased the hands.

The mask, a perforated golden one, was studded with pearls, bordered by a flounce of priceless lace which completely covered the chin. The charm and grace, the air of delighted expectancy, the bird-like poise, and distinction of the wearer's carriage was indescribable.

Across the front of the three-cornered cap was marked in gilded letters one word, Folly.

The Ambassador scrutinized the figure long and steadily. His expression was serene. What he thought was, 'as usual, to be imagined. Apparently he had no opinion whatsoever upon the subject.

He made a sign to his footman with his hand.

"You may await Mrs. Markoe down-stairs for a few moments. I will conduct her to the carriage," he said, succinctly.

The footman withdrew.

Neither of the two spoke for some moments.

"Take off your mask," suggested the Ambassador, coldly.

Without a word she obeyed.

The creamy arms, their contour dented in unexpected places under the soft flesh, indentures which were not dimples but which looked as if they wished to be, were lifted. A clasp under the coiffure was unfastened. She stood with her mask in her hand.

Her face was flushed, mutinous, petulant, a little hard. Her eyes' expression was dubious.

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As though unable to resist longer the development which might be brewing, she asked, petulantly, "How do you think I look?"

The Ambassador cleared his throat. "The left shoulder-strap," he suggested distantly,—not at all as though he felt any personal interest in the matter,—"isn't it a little too far off the shoulder?"

"That's the fashion," she said. "Intentional, you know," with an explanatory gesture. "Is my costume becoming, do you think?"

"Very," returned the Ambassador, with about the same amount of enthusiasm in his tone he might have used in requesting a servant to close the door.

"Madeleine goes as Marie Antoinette," she began again, feverishly, hurriedly, as though to put behind her at once his visible lack of interest. She was bitterly aware of it. "Her costume? It's perfect."

"A beautiful woman, Mrs. Conway," acquiesced the Ambassador perfunctorily. He looked at his watch. "When do you meet her?"

"At two thirty," she returned, "on the staircase; second landing."

"Hadn't you better hurry a little?" inquired Markoe, with the first show of interest he had evinced.

She snatched up her mask.

"Let me fasten it for you?" he said.

She bent her head, after confiding the mask to his big hand, reluctantly.

He passed back of her. He held the mask, a frivolous thing enough, which, for a few hours, was to conceal Mrs. Markoe's lovely face, and give some moments of relaxation from its accustomed expression of polite indifference demanded of her by the public. He lifted the soft curls.

Because of this the nape of her soft neck was disclosed,

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helpless, bared to his scrutiny, highly delectable ; essentially kissable.

His fingers hesitated a moment. Long enough for her to cry out, "Won't you hurry, please?"

There was a click. The charming countenance was hidden. The curls fell into place. The Ambassador stepped back into his proper niche of Ambassador.

But if she had looked around, if she had moved a hair's breadth to right or left, if she had swerved in her mood, or breathed up instead of down, she would have mastered the man.

Into the inscrutable eyes had come a fierce, unguarded light. The blue steel went out. The red fire burned in. The veins in the hand which fastened the tiny clasp throbbed visibly. The strangled pulse of the human being, who had chosen out of a great love to make this woman his wife, woke, plead, and was conquered.

The Ambassador had learned his lesson. He knew it body and soul.

"Stephen," said a very quiet voice, unexpectedly, as the powerful hands folded her cloak about her and dropped once more to Markoe's sides, "I often wonder why you married me."

About the Ambassador's lips crept a curiously grim line. It died out.

"Why, indeed?" he answered, being a man of few words.

"Because," went on the flute-like voice persistently, the inflection was essentially weary, "there are times when it seems to me you are almost too accustomed to me."

"I am never that," he answered, this time forcibly.

Still she hesitated. The hour was very late. She knew it. She did not care. She was so miserable.

"Well?" vouchsafed the Ambassador, neutrally.

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"I am lonely," she confessed, suddenly, with a pitiful little thrill in her voice. Well aware was she that without her mask the present scene would have remained forever unrehearsed.

"Have you not all you require? Are the servants not to your taste? Do they not——?" He was speaking as though by rote.

She interrupted him passionately. "The servants? The household? How dense you are! I want companionship. I am lonely over here. At home it is so different. All the girls run in, and there are a thousand and one interests—I can—forget. I miss——" she hesitated a moment.

He had been regarding her steadily. Now his eyelids were lowered. His head was bent upon his chest. He had folded his arms. He stood perfectly still, apparently listening with indifference. In reality his heart had swelled terribly under that pitiful thrill in her voice. "Poor child," he was thinking; "poor, little, tortured child."

"I miss," she said, with emphasis, "Jack."

"Ah!" from the Ambassador. The exclamation had come out with a rush. It was immediately checked. It seemed to his wife that Markoe bit off a piece of spontaneity between his teeth. His tongue was his slave, not his master; his will, a heavily hampered adversary. His intention invariably governed his impulse.

Because of which he added later in that colorless voice of his which could be so tender but would not, "Odd that you miss him. Why, the boy has been gone but two days!"

"All the same, I miss him," intensely, giving vent, apparently, to an unbridled impulse in order to deliver her heart of an overcharged memory. "He has time for me. He listens to me. He admires me. He understands me.

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He runs errands for me. He looks up things and places for me to go and see. He is Jack. Bless him!" cried this little rebel.

The Ambassador was silent for a moment. Then he vouchsafed, with a humorous irony cropping out between his words, "An efficient self-made courier, Jack, you mean?"

"How unkind!" she ejaculated.

"But a fair specimen," he hastened to add; "a very fair specimen of a boy."

"Fair!" she reiterated, scornfully, with that exasperating look women wear of knowing much which they could disclose but won't.

"A little raw," went on the Ambassador's cool, pitiless voice, "suggestive of veal somewhat, at intervals, in his enthusiasms, head over heel of their kind. Too impetuous. Young, but considerable of a boy."

"Boy!" she cried, with an impatient movement. She was looking at him defiantly as she passed him. He had procured his hat, and was about to follow her to the carriage. "I hardly think you realize, Stephen, how very much Jack is a—man."

There was a pause. She descended the stairs. He stood with the door-knob in his hand looking straight at her.

"Do you?" he inquired, pleasantly.

Mrs. Markoe stepped past him into the carriage.

"En route," said Markoe to the footman after he had tucked the carriage robes about his mistress, the Ambassador standing a grim sponsor for the deed the while. "Attendez," to the coachman. The footman had sprung to his seat.

The Ambassador took off his hat and leaned his head into the brougham window.

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"Do I neglect you—is that what you mean, Kate?" he asked.

She hesitated.

"I think," she returned after a moment that literally throbbed with unseen things for them both, "perhaps, that if you stopped to consider the little time you give me, and how much you lavish on other people, you would conclude that, from appearances, an unbiased critic might imagine the other people to be uppermost." The tone was stand-offish in the extreme.

"Do not we pay all our official visits together?" dryly.

"Yes."

"We drive every afternoon—you have told me we should be seen together at least once a day—in the Bois."

"Oh, that!"

"We are the living picture of a happy couple," went on the monotonous voice. "Is not that enough?"

"I hate living pictures," flashed out Folly.

The Ambassador stared icily into the eyes behind the mask; they were regarding him defiantly. His wife's whole figure was visible. There was a brilliant gas lamp near.

"I think that was our bargain; was it not, Kate?"

She stirred ever so slightly. That he should have been obliged to remind her!

"Kate!" The tone was rasping, a cry.

"Will you tell Baptiste to drive on?" she asked, icily.

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CHAPTER XIII

REMINISCENT

THE Ambassador made his way up the steps heavily as Mrs. Markoe's brougham rolled out into the Avenue Marceau. There was no spring in his step. There was little life in his face. When he reached his study he sank into a chair and bent his forehead on his scooped palm.

He was looking back, a luxury he seldom indulged in. He was a man of simple habits. He considered retrospection foolish in the first place, useless in the second.

She had said full two years ago that she "did not love him." He had answered that he "knew."

Yes. He knew.

He had never forgiven himself the gigantic folly of supposing an exquisite child like Kate Morrow could love a man of his settled tastes and ponderous convictions. To be sure, she had said she loved him, at the first, dazzled possibly by the prospect of becoming united with a public citizen who ranked so high among his fellow-creatures. But the respect she had borne him—which, out of her innocence and ignorance, she considered love—had "not been love" she confessed to him, one night, in her impetuous, abnormally cruel, self-revelment.

He loved her. He always should love her. The fact was as unalterable as his life. But "in his middle-aged way," she had more than once reminded him. Her youth was the only feature which made him bitterly regret his middle age at times. Man-like, he ignored the loss of beauty or charm which the acknowledgment of years brings home so painfully to a woman. He had considered that

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she must know how profoundly she was the flesh of his flesh and the bone of his bone. None other.

That had been his gravest fault she had told him ; the sin which she could not forgive. His simple faith that she knew and understood, believed, trusted. She ignored the fact that reiterated expression of love often emphasizes a conscious lack which the concealment of passion reveals.

She had begun by drawing comparisons with the manners of the husbands of her friends. Gradually it stole in upon her that Stephen was undemonstrative. In her maiden pride she dared not plead for outward symptoms. In his recognition of the concession she had made, according him her youth and unusual beauty in exchange for his mature manhood and experience, he feared to evince his passion too forcibly, for fear of altogether killing hers.

They had drifted slowly and surely, in consequence, wider and wider apart.

Then, that night ! He was remembering it now. The shadow on his face was heavy ; the indomitable mouth, with its look of steadfastness and power, was extremely sad. The man sat literally eating his heart out over his sorrow. That night—would he ever forget the little proud quivering figure in its ball-dress, standing on the threshold of their room at home ? He likened her, in after-hours, to the angel with the flaming sword denying him his Gate of Paradise.

She had accused him of indifference. Some fancied slight, some evidence of selfishness of which he had been guiltless. As he listened, the total unreasonableness of her attack had come home to him so strongly that he had found no words with which to refute her misconstruction. He had only recognized the collapse of his dream. His fairy structure had crumbled before his eyes.

He had no heart to patch it together. Vainer men than

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he might have endeavored to do so,—men less passionately and singly devoted. But he had not even denied. He had recoiled, mentally helpless, before her torrent of wilful misapprehension and injustice.

She had her passion out. Even after it had spent itself it never occurred to him to remind her of the evidences of his loving care and trust, and pride in her her home bore witness to ; her unlimited expenditures expressed ; her freedom and original methods exposed ; the hard places he softened for her by watchfulness as tactful as it was deft ; the errors of judgment she might have made without his steady good sense at the helm. Personally, his ambition was an unknown quantity.

For her it was overpowering. Nobody appreciated more acutely than this silent, self-contained man Kate Markoe's rare qualities. But it was innate with him to foster and cherish silently the thing he loved ; to strive not to spoil it with overpraise. His reserve, sadly enough a latent force which had accrued with startling rapidity under her reiterated accusation of a selfishness which left her whims unconsidered, was the source of all her wretchedness.

He had not spoken ; principally because he had learned, by aid of her cutting, merciless words, she did not care.

It would have taken a more accomplished student of womankind than Stephen Markoe to dare combat a force so tangible as this.

Theirs was the old story of the woman who demands the expression of love exhaustively, endlessly, and of the man who feels it so much he cannot express it. She wanted words. He gave proofs. She exacted assurances. He lived and breathed for her. She ignored it.

"With your coldness and indifference," she had said, "you have put me away from you. You have made life commonplace where it should have been rose-colored."

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"Rose-colored!" he had exclaimed, bitterly, bewildered at having to wage war against this untenable idealistic vision,—he who knew so exhaustively the ins and outs of things, the realities of life, the ineptitudes of happiness, "Rose-colored! You should have married a boy—with views."

"True," she retorted. "But we are married, more's the pity, and you, as much as I, must put up with it. But since you will not and cannot fall in with my 'views,' spare me the semblance of love from a sense of duty. We can keep up an effigy of happiness if you like, for the sake of appearances. The rest is odious, impossible,—as much to you, no doubt, as to me."

And he had not spoken.

Out of his acknowledgment of her sweetest purity and youth, with the sad and solemn conviction of her lamentable disorder, he forbore to plead where a lesser man might have commanded.

Since then they had led the crippled, strangled life of two beings yoked together by one acknowledged purpose: to deceive the world as to their real relation.

In the interests of his busy life the sordid weariness of the situation went out at periods, swallowed up by his cares. At deeper moments he contemplated it all with profound pity.

He had rejoiced for her sake at the recent honor so unexpectedly thrust upon him. "It may lighten her burden, poor child," he thought.

Instead the breach seemed widening. He was more powerless than ever to arrest its course.

She, acclaimed as the bright particular star of any and every firmament, utilized other men's admiration as a wedge to widen her grievance. She literally flung herself into a vortex of gayety because of the consciousness of the death of all things which made life worth living. She thought she had been disillusionized. She was only blind.

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He controlled her incomings and outgoings uncomplainingly ; her banker ; her adviser, when requested ; her comrade no more.

He felt like her jailer. She fretted at the bars. She considered herself forsaken, overlooked in the Ambassador's dignified interpretation of his manifold duties. She forgot his present most difficult position of trust existed by force of her commands. She would have been grateful for his interest even, had he exhibited nothing more. He dared not profess to feel interest. He had arrived at almost not feeling it. He gave purpose, patience, will, care, fidelity, in return for her mutability.

But his pride had received an almost mortal blow.

Hers, woman-like, resented its own unjustly enforced, hence most deserving, punishment.



CHAPTER XIV

AT THE DUCHESS'S

THERE is a dart through the perfumed air ; then a many-colored flash, swift as the wing-fleck of a flying bird.

"It's Mariotti!" shouts the tossing throng, pushing forward in its eager, insatiable reach after a new toy.

The Hotel Launoy is thrown wide from the tessellated vestibule faced with a granite double-balustered flight of steps, through the vast entrance hall galleried above into two tiers of landings, past the antechambers, the large and small salons, in under the marble staircase which leads to the floor above, out to the famous gardens which lie melting and quivering under the dual rays of tempered electric light and full moonbeam.

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It is crowded with a rainbow-tinted throng of dancers and masks frolicking, pirouetting in mad accord. There are dominoes, orange, purple, yellow, scarlet, white, black, mauve, pink, green. There are cardinals in blood-colored robes chatting with peers of an unknown realm in black and yellow. Purple-clad prelates sandle-footed, rosary-belted; monseigneurs, a group of them, wearing the emerald insignia which bespeaks the Vatican. There are pages like old missals in illuminated colors, green, bronze, and dull gilt. There are vivandières in regimental orders, tiny barrels slung across their shoulders, administering refreshing beverages to the overheated dancers.

Pierrots and Pierrettes coo like traditional doves in corners against the tapestried background of discrete tête-à-tête rooms screened for the purpose of exchanging confidences. The wax lights flicker under their tinted globes. Bands of revellers, linked arm in arm, chase across the vestibule, down the steps, and round the house to the garden at the back. They surround the great granite palace.

There is a lull.

The queen of the footlights arrives, dashing up under the porte cochère in her specially constructed victoria which bespeaks, in the clamor of its belled harness, the notoriety of a celebrity. She comes attired in her well-known toilette in which she has played the death scene in a drama being given at the Renaissance, a drama in which the heroine dies of poison in her own ball-room. After which death's portrayer has administered a fresh dash of powder to her nose and a soupçon of rouge to her chin and her ear-lobes, and has made off to secure her portion of amusement.

Hers is a royal road up the marble staircase towards the Duchesse, who extends her hand, to receive her illustrious guest, with marked favor. The swaying crowd fantasti-

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cally acclaims this well-known theatrical favorite with fanciful steps born of the occasion's ecstasy. The kisses that are thrown to her, the praises that are exchanged under her pleased gaze, the pirouettes which are executed, before her advancing figure, as a gayly constituted body-guard speeds forth to lead her up the stairs, prove her popularity.

She bows and smiles, highly elated.

The marble balustrades are bound with garlands of roses. Ministers of State, disguised as court fools or grand chamberlains, block the way, inclining fantastically, saluting pompously. There are Eastern women veiled everywhere except across their eyes, and Spanish dancers with twinkling ankles.

The orchestra strikes up the Habanera.

A feminine figure with a high comb in her hair, a red rose concealed in a coquettishly disposed piece of lace, a rounded body fitted miraculously into a yellow satin gown meshed in black chenille, emerges from a group of chattering maskers and begins stepping daintily, with insinuating grace, to the intrinsically voluptuous strains of Bizet's *Carmen*. She sings ; she dances : at the same time she lends an unhipped translation of the Spanish heroine to the lilt of that audacious theme which undoes austerity as effectually as it teaches an erotic lesson in living.

The throng begins whispering among itself that this is a personage of note. Not the prima donna Paris had acclaimed all winter in a hitherto altogether novel and exuberant example of their favorite character. At the whisper—an aristocratic name speeds from ear to ear, from lip to lip—a wave of apprehension sweeps across the dancing body.

With an unattended dart it glides away and is lost amid the throng.

A group of clownesses waltz forward. They trip out a

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fandango, their odd, white-leaded countenances ludicrously painted in effigy of a smile, with wide red lips and convulsed brows, and cheeks made up of laughter lines. They make way for a set of Watteau shepherds and shepherdesses who, at a given signal, take their places in line to the stately measure of a minuet. It is followed by a gavotte, the powdered heads of the maskers inclining as by rote, their movements marked.

The evening is but a quarter spent, the flowers are barely withered on their stems, the atmosphere has not had time to vitiate, when a harlequin springs into view ; a harlequin made of fire and steel, or quicksilver, with elastic limbs, muscular, tireless, a victim of fantastic quips, of daring leaps, of insinuating curves, a very prince of mischief and by-play.

It seems as though he comes to prove how rarely good a thing is laughter ; how worthy of seeking, happiness ; how fleeting, gayety. He proves the first with his high spirits, the acme of intoxication ; he accentuates the second in his recklessness. He leads the game of merriment, a very king of fools.

"It's Mariotti !" they all cry simultaneously, at last, as exhausted with his meanderings, led hither and thither after his bewildering ups and downs and sideways pranks, they recede.

As one man they mass together to still him. This elusive sprite, with his black and green and purple limbs, must be taken captive. But as they press forward, their arms extended, laughing, shouting, striving to caress, the figure bounds up past them into the air and disappears.

"It's Mariotti ! It must be Mariotti !" they yell, aghast.

They have surged forward to seize him, grasping, tripping, falling. He has melted into thin air.

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They stop appalled.

For as they hiss, roar, shout, tumble about in search of this being who represents in such perfection the nucleus of their unchecked joy, suddenly far out on the edge, perched on an ornate encrustation of an elaborate pillar, above the gallery in which is seated the Duchesse and her guests, looms forth their fantastic tormentor, scaling easily the dizziest height imaginable.

Then there rises a cheer of astonishment and recognition ! Their doubts are at an end. Their failure to achieve as much as this being whose art it is to prove a level head, steel-muscle limbs, is explicable.

No one save Mariotti had been capable of this. Mariotti, the clown, the trapèze performer, the spoiled child of the hour. This is, indeed, a whim of the Duchesse. How magnificently wrought out !

Here he comes !

He swoops down upon them with a wild yell. He clasps a struggling, shrieking vivandière captive. He bends his masked lips to hers, in spite of the jeerings and mockings of the delighted crowd. As he bends to kiss the face—so masterfully forced to meet the mocking masked one above it—suddenly his hand shoots forth. It seizes a rose from the bosom of a laughing flower-girl near. With a mocking motion—carrying in its pantomimic hint the definition that stolen fruit is not a preference of this delinquent—he lays his pillaged proffering saucily against the lips below his, and dashes on, the throng at his heels.

“Mariotti, it is thou, n'est-ce-pas ? Tell us the tale of the baa-baa and the cow ; eh, Mariotti ?”

But the harlequin darts ahead, now here, now there, running in jumps like a kangaroo, crawling on all-fours like a dog, leaping to inscribe curious circles in the air, turning at unexpected intervals with that mock air of superiority to

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cheer, in emulation of the crowd's caterwaulings ; to shout in imitation of their shouts ; to shriek, to laugh, to applaud.

He starts as a major-domo passes attired as a halberdier. The pompous fellow brings down his jewelled staff upon the tessellated floor and announces in stentorian tones, " Souper."

The harlequin's pursuers perceive their advantage. They rush forward and fall upon him. For an instant they seem to hold the most daring figure of all in their delighted tumultuous grasp,—for an instant only.

The creature must be possessed of a demoniacal force, of a magic means of escape. He eludes,—their hands and arms fingering his garments, with the taste of his breath in their nostrils.

He stands at the head of the staircase now, looking back with that mocking air which is so indescribably mischievous.

There is an inarticulate cry of baffled rage. A domino darts forward,—of unutterable mischief, on pleasure bent. He will attain or die.

With a leap far into the perfumed air below him—a leap in which the tense, elastic, marvellously graceful figure has seemed for one breathless instant to swing in mid-air, motionless—Mariotti is no more !

Did he go down the staircase? Nobody knows. Did he glide away on a moonbeam? A drifting ray is melting in below there through the aperture of a tented recess to the left of the entrance-way. The question is unanswerable,—Mariotti, their life, their toy, their tireless, bewitching comrade, has gone, escaped them.

The throng protesting tumultuously, exchanging laughing, irritated sallies, is forced to seek amusement elsewhere.

As the fantastic form glides through the gardens furtively, leaping over dark spaces with noiseless feet, evading the

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bright patches made by the moonbeams and artificial lights, there comes a breath in his ear.

"Mariotti! I am a friend; tu comprends? Meet me there—by the kiosque."

The sentence is voiced in French, with a slight foreign inflection.

"Bien," says Mariotti. The fever of intrigue is still boiling in his blood.

Ten minutes later two figures stand under a tree in front of a kiosque at the corner of the Champs-Élysées. The Place de la Concorde, softly lit up with its myriad, absinthe-colored lights, stilly gleams under the velvet impress of the night. It stars its own pathway, from the Seine to the Madeleine, until dawn.

It is late,—two A.M. The speaker is pleading. Mariotti obstinate.

"And wherefore, monsieur?"

"For a freak. Simply a whim. I will make it one hundred francs."

"A song," protests Mariotti, contemptuously. The keen light of the professional expert who knows more than the face value of the talent his public overrates grows apace in his unmasked countenance. He is moping his purple brow.

"Five hundred," impatiently.

Mariotti's pulse leaps. He glances curiously at the speaker. Is he prince or beggar? It would be difficult to determine. The stranger wears a slouch hat, well drawn over his brows. A scarf conceals his chin and throat to the eyes. He is attired in a loose coat. His boots are muddy. He is tall and spare.

"Eight hundred," suggests Mariotti finally, still reluctantly; adding, as his companion hesitates, "I hand you over the costume then for good and all."

"Done."

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In a trice Mariotti stands counting over the bills in bewildered fashion. Who is this individual who carries bank-notes worth—so it seems to the simple rascal—a king's ransom on his person, who exchanges his own identity for the doubtful calling of a clown with calm? Mariotti's costume has been donned above his every-day clothes. The individual into whose eager hands he has thrust his disguise has seized it piece by piece as it is doffed, gingerly. He contemplates it with what seems like satisfaction. In reality it is disgust. The costume is worn, old, and shabby.

"Hold," says Mariotti. "I do a scurvy thing, monsieur, to thus sell myself twice."

"Twice?"

There is the underlying impress of a humorous contempt in the tone, a dominant note which has transfixed the clown all through this odd transaction. It seems now to boast of a power which threatens to overmatch Mariotti's belief that he has contracted a good bargain,—what Mariotti calls a "good bargain,"—clean money for a roll of dirty rags. The mask has been handed over also. The recipient cogitates. He, visibly, is wondering where he may effect a change in his own costume without disclosing his identity.

The mask first.

As he lifts his hat to insinuate the little black silk face between his eyebrows and hair, Mariotti gives vent to a low exclamation of wrathful recognition.

"Ciel!" he falls back. "But," he cries aloud, "it's the monsieur who——"

"Be silent, you hound!"

Mariotti desists, shaking like a leaf. He clasps his hands appealingly. "Monsieur, monsieur! it must not be. You alone know Lamballe's secret. He wears my costume also. It must not be. With two of me there will be endless complications."

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"Yes," concurs the voice behind the scarf, with grim determination not unpossessed of a biting humor, "there will be 'complications.' Look here," it continues shortly, turning towards Mariotti, who is pale as a sheet and trembling visibly, "you betrayed his secret. More's the pity. If you think I have gone thus far and am going no farther you don't know me. See?" with a gentle irony which leaves Mariotti speechless. The speaker is not waiting for a response. This he makes evident. "March on, you son of a mucker," impatiently; "show me where to make myself beautiful or, by Jove, I'll tell your story to Lamballe!"

"There's a house below there," murmurs Mariotti, after a moment's utter collapse; it makes his companion chuckle, a sound Mariotti remembers to the end of his life. He points to a cluster of lights a short distance from them. "Monsieur can change his costume and not be disturbed."

"Right you are."

A hand is laid heavily on Mariotti's cringing shoulder. "Come with me, you betrayer of identity. Once bit, twice shy; I don't think I care to let you out of my sight, you distinguished rascal."

"Pour l'amour de Dieu, monsieur," whines Mariotti; he is running alongside the tall figure which strides forward so powerfully, its hand always fastened sturdily in the bunch of muscle which seems the integral part of his conductor's coat-sleeve.

"Dieu, Mariotti?" repeats the ironical, undaunted voice. "God, you mean? If 'twere not for the love of woman, my boy, I'd let *you* go, God knows."

HALF-PAST TWO A.M.

CHAPTER XV

HALF-PAST TWO A.M.

THE Duchesse is enjoying herself. "How I like life!" she ejaculates, every now and then, under her breath. She has said it more than once in her spin down the years; in her manner, which is genial; through her living, that is individual. Her husband has been a legitimist. Odd that she, his wife, should have totally abandoned his prejudices, which cramped, to assume her own, which mellow.

She "prefers to be taught than to teach," confesses the Duchesse. She has used a portion of her fortune to skirt the borders of several continents, to prove foreign methods and manners, foreign ways, means of reasoning, living. She has profited therefrom. She has returned invariably enlightened to her native land; fresh air in her nostrils, old theories banished; swept clean of the clogging element induced by stay-at-home fogysim.

The Duchesse's main clause in her declaration of independence is outspoken admiration for America. She claims it has taught her two lessons. Foremost, anent friendship between the sexes. Subsequently as regards a lavish hospitality, before which she throws down her arms.

She is reflecting soberly to-night, in spite of her gay sallies and her attentive ears and her comprehending eyes, that human nature is truer to itself in mask and domino than otherwise. She has always argued that the big maxim, too often considered a small one, which bids society not carry its heart in its sleeve—in its hand if it will, or behind its tired eyes, or on its lips, or through its make-

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shift tongue, but never in its sleeve—to be the provoker of much that is lamentable in man- and womankind.

In that rollicking throng below she sees the abandon of the butterfly under the sunlight ; the frank avowal of the bee that seeks honey solely because it is sweet.

She is glad ; thankful she feels no less. Grateful she sees no more.

“A very great thing, human nature,” states she to her neighbor, an Austrian Princess who has arrived in Paris the day before to be at her friend's fête to-night. “A simple and lovable thing too—when unchecked. It only grows petulant, stifled, poisonous, when it is tamed or civilized.”

“Do you think so?” returns the Princess, doubtfully.

“Think so,” repeats the Duchesse, impatiently. “I know it. Does a dog fail to lick his comrade's wounds into health until he is taught there may be poison in them?”

“Ah ! But who puts the poison there?” returns the Princess, who is notoriously fond of extending her experience.

“Civilization,” retorts the Duchesse, triumphantly. “Knowledge, growth. Nature teaches human nature what not to do every day of its glowing, God-proving existence.”

“Youth, perhaps, is willing to be ignorant. Not so middle age,” the Princess insists.

“I am not talking of rust, or moth, or mould,” vouchsafes the Duchesse, with a short sigh. “I claim that man, like horse, is rendered vicious through his trainer.”

“And his trainer is the world,” states the Princess.

“It all depends upon how we make use of our knowledge,” protests the Duchesse, in her fresh mellow voice. “If the medicine administered to human nature by human nature were half of it repudiated, I contend there would be more cases of salvation than have yet been quoted.”

HALF-PAST TWO A.M.

"You are peculiar. You will not admit, even, of innate wickedness!"

"*Que veux-tu?*" exclaims the Duchesse, soberly, "I grow old."

She is seated in the gallery above the great staircase opposite the entrance-way, which is draped with silken tissues bearing the emblem of France, a gigantic fleur-de-lis. At her left stands the English Ambassador with his look of acquired dilettantism impregnated with stolid satisfaction. On her right is an attaché of the Swedish Embassy who has but just arrived. He bends to kiss her slender hand. He watches, with kindling eyes, the scene below them. The throng is swelling every hour. It is nearly two thirty A.M.

There is a blast from the horn a footman, in the de Launoy livery, had carried to his lips. He is stationed near the great entrance-door to announce the guests. The crowd makes way for a stately figure which moves past.

The Duchesse draws in her breath. She leans over the railing.

A major-domo has advanced to escort a regal figure upstairs towards Madame de Launoy.

One would say Marie Antoinette herself, in her palmy days, before the ghostly finger of a hideous fate had pointed towards her. The face is masked. But in those royal blue velvet paniers from knee to waist, the corsage cut to reveal a snowy neck and shoulders, with a kerchief of lace knotted about the bosom as Louis XVI.'s queen loved to wear it, with a mass of snow-white hair surmounted by a *tocque* of blue velvet, ornamented with a huge *aigrette* sparkling with diamonds, this is the fairest copy imaginable of the haughty Austrian who marched to her doom with the same insouciance with which she confronted her accusers, and exposed her follies.

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"Madeleine," explains the Duchesse in the Princess's ear.

She glances over her shoulder to see if another expected guest may have ingratiated himself among the group about her chair. No. The English Ambassador is exchanging platitudes with the Princess.

The Swedish attaché waves his handkerchief across to a Spanish beauty who has tossed him a rose.

As the Duchesse contemplates the figure advancing slowly up the stairs, a Folly—but the most exquisite interpretation of unwisdom this great lady has ever seen—crosses a corridor which meets the landing half-way up, and makes her way towards Marie Antoinette.

They exchange a few words. Together the two come forward. The major-domo falls back.

The figure of France's doomed queen, singularly enough,—it occurs to the Duchesse,—is now accompanied by a masked semblance of what France so bitterly proclaimed to be her reigning sovereign's besetting sin. The Folly who advances so calmly is as eloquent a plea in her royal mistress's favor as beauty is ever a plea for vanity.

By her bewitching costume she commands attention. Because the world cringes to a master and repudiates a slave she obtains it. Not an eye in that vast assembly fails to gaze with awe upon the two masked figures which, with such rare grace, are advancing to do homage to the mistress of the house. One and all accord them the tribute of boundless curiosity and admiration.

As they stop under the gallery just in front of the Duchesse there rises a discreetly modulated murmur of applause.

THREE MODERN DROMIOS

CHAPTER XVI

THREE MODERN DROMIOS

THE Duchesse leaned forward impressively.

"Thrice welcome," cried she, in her sonorous voice. "Will your most gracious Majesty but condescend to seat herself within my humble circle?" This was said in emulation of the exalted manner required of a reigning sovereign's subjects, a manner which the Duchesse, with twinkling eyes, hit off to the life, while at the same time she regarded every detail of the marvellously perfect costume which submitted itself to her appreciative scrutiny.

She threw wide a carved miniature gate, a part of the gallery railing in front of her. The hasp of this was unfastened only at the Duchesse's sweet will. She made a motion for Marie Antoinette to enter.

"Most willingly," returned a low voice, with a sober, musical intonation.

Without further ado the queen entered. With a stately inclination to the distinguished company attendant upon the Duchesse she seated herself at her hostess's right.

The gate still remained ajar.

The Duchesse was observing closely the enchanting originality of the figure dressed as Folly which lingered outside.

"A friend of Madeleine's," thought she. She again inclined. She repeated the gesture of invitation with which she had begged Marie Antoinette to join her ranks.

To her surprise, Folly demurred.

"Not so," murmured a disguised voice, indistinctly, from behind a perforated golden mask dotted with seed

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pearls, and flounced with a ruffle of lace which barely concealed the cleft in a lovely chin. "It were not meet, oh, most noble lady, that Folly should attain, without effort, so exalted a recognition as a queen of France."

The Duchesse smiled. The words were double-edged. She welcomed wit, like most French women, as a proof of that superior mentality which fences by means of femininity's best weapon,—tact.

"And yet," she replied, "we are told that Folly has climbed heights, and sounded depths, that many a queen has aspired to, vainly."

"The reason why Folly, to-night, elects to remain outside the charmed circle," returned the disguised voice of her interlocutor, instantly; "she prefers the common throng with whom intrigue is the watchword, where honors may be even."

"A wise decision," murmured the Duchesse, approvingly.

She pulled the gate to. Across her face, the only feminine one in that vast assembly which remained unmasked, flitted the shadow of a regret. Who was this who dared to decline an honor extended to so few, she wondered for a brief second.

Folly stood lightly poised on her two slippared feet. The light from the mammoth crystal chandelier above shone out to light two huge paste buckles which sparkled against her high instep, against her orange silk ankles, and the tiny satin slippers embroidered with French love-knots. Through her mask her eyes gazed intently, seeking to pierce the subtle meaning of the manifold crush below, a crush of color kaleidoscopic, surging in and out: a quivering rainbow of varying beauty.

As she looked, there floated towards her ears and to the ears of the Duchesse and her guests an indistinct murmur,

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which advanced, was caught up, and spread with the rapidity of chain-lightning. From a group around the entrance-way, in and out of the myriad corridors to left and right of the hall below, until it increased to a roar which widened and deepened, the sound seemed a worded device, tossed like a shuttlecock from mind to mind, from lip to lip, from tongue to tongue.

It detached itself at last from the noise and confusion, and sprang crisply forth out of the throng's midst to salute the straining ears of the Duchesse and her group.

When it sounded, that portion of the swarm of maskers who, up to this, had ignored its import, became as though magically endowed with unparalleled intoxication. A new pulse was born, an emanation from the joy the word's utterance foretold, a talisman that made that whole laughing world akin.

In a trice the multitude was cheering, shouting, surging, gesticulating. Myriad faces twisted eagerly towards a figure which, it could now be seen, was pushing its way through the ranks about the entrance-door.

"It's a man," announced the English Ambassador,—leaning forward from a higher altitude than the rest of the Duchesse's circle had been able to command, he thus controlled a view which overlooked the situation below,—“a man in the costume of a harlequin. He enters. He is coming this way.”

The cry was mounting up. The figure was trying to make a pathway up the staircase towards the Duchesse,—this was plainly discernible.

The yells of recognition grew more and more distinguishable. Then came a burst of uproarious acknowledgment that made the chandeliers rattle.

The figure sprang forth fully revealed.

There was another burst of frantic delight.

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It was a man's figure, slim, unusually tall, clad in a silk maillot of as many colors as Joseph's coat,—the costume of a harlequin.

The name which detached itself from the dust and noise and fluctuating wave of motion and color below now floated up to them clear, unmistakable.

“Mariotti !”

“Notre ami Mariotti !” let forth a monk in a brown cowl with a rope knotted about his waist, a beard which drooped against his chest like a twist of brown fur, and a tonsured head.

The name was caught up a thousand strong, in every shade of meaning, with every grade of conviction,—doubt, joy, relief, mockery.

“Mariotti, Mariotti ! Thou hast returned to us then, again, thou imp of deviltry ?” This, Mariotti !

Where was the elasticity of the bounding figure Paris knew so well ? Whence had fled the reckless audacity of the trapèze performer with his steel-trained muscles, his pranks, his mercurial entity, their playmate, their toy ?

The harlequin was an exact prototype of Mariotti ; that was incontestable. But this figure exacted the subservience those who control high places obtain by their royal air. His poise, so supple and absolute, was that of a master spirit, not a clown. To be sure, the movements were indescribable. But the figure obtained in a trice, without the aid of any outward sign, the allegiance of the illustrious of that vast throng. It bore the imprint of conscious pride of race. The larger portion of the maskers, with the affrighted gaze of awe-stricken children gradually taking umbrage at an element in their midst which was foreign to their hitherto interpretation of rollicking joy, began to protest loudly.

“Art fatigued, Mariotti ?” asked one,—a lad clad as a

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butterfly, with black and blue wings, and antennæ which had paid their homage to the purport of the night by tickling tortured prayers for mercy from the victims of their wearer's prowess.

"Art ill, Mariotti?" This was a soft, woman's voice ; a nun with a white kerchief across her brow, which belied the coquetry of the eyes below it.

"Art in love, thou laggard?" mocked a third.

But the figure pressed on silently.

It made its way past them out into a space in front of the staircase when——

Were eyes bewildered? Had joy degenerated into delirium? Was the throng victim of nightmare or of unbridled and too riotous intoxication? Had their ecstasy of merriment undone them? Was this Mariotti?

If so, what was that?

For as the first harlequin set his rainbow-clad instep with its black-slippered sole against the lower step of the staircase, which he was about to mount, a second harlequin appeared upon the second landing ; the counterpart of the harlequin below.

The first harlequin gave vent to an ejaculation.

The second one stood still.

His head, upon which was the multicolored cap compatible with harlequin etiquette, seemed quivering with a demoniacal expression of conscious deviltry.

'Twas almost as if the one were the mirror for the other.

At a distance they looked the same height. Perhaps, had the measure been taken, it might have registered the difference of half an inch between these two ; no more.

The first harlequin now began to move forward.

Not a sound from the breathless silent throng, which was craning its variegated neck towards this unexpected rally of innumerable Mariottis.

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Was it a trick of their incorrigible trifle? it was asked dumbly.

Were there one or two or three Mariottis?

The figure above was to the figure below as the cheek to the cheek. The figure below to the figure above as the eyelash to the eyelash.

The same graceful form ; the same poise ; the same black eyes, roving restlessly behind two slits in the black mask : the same air of reserved strength, of race ; tendons alert : muscles supple, and under absolute control.

The harlequin above, as though to accentuate his counterpart's manifest discomfiture, executed a fantastic flourish ; a mocking inclination to his double below.

The harlequin below returned his salute with marked emphasis. Then, with a shrug, he made a bound forward, and dashed towards his second self on the landing above.

The second harlequin, at this, moved slowly forward. He, too, evidently was desirous of an encounter.

As they approached one another the crowd's hushed watchfulness burst its bounds. There came whispers, excited cries ; bets were exchanged freely as to either of the harlequin's identity.

" 'Tis Mariotti's double !" they cried, vociferously, as the two harlequins approached one another, and more fully exposed an absolute oneness in the fidelity of their make-up.

The ground of each costume was black, with darts of color shot helter-skelter across it, like jets of flame woven into the stuff. By a close observer the costume of the first harlequin disclosed itself of a newer make than the somewhat shabby costume of the second ; but this remained unnoticed. The costume was known to all Paris as the "costume Mariotti."

" 'Tis the devil and his shadow," muttered the attaché, crossing himself.

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The Duchesse frowned. Marie Antoinette turned pale under her mask. For some unknown reason her heart-strings seemed to have tightened.

Folly lifted her soft arm off the railing on which it had reclined. She stood back, fearlessly, to make way for the advancing pair.

As the first harlequin met the second on the landing, just below two steps which remained to be spanned in order to reach the Duchesse, the second bent and whispered three words in the first harlequin's ear.

"Is it thou, Lamballe?"

There was but an instant's hesitation, unperceivable to the throng.

Then the first harlequin let forth three words,—a phrase which carried the weight of a light rebuke,—nothing more.

"Mariotti, thou clown!"

The two passed on together towards the Duchesse.

But the heart of the second harlequin was beating furiously with a sense of triumph.

The first harlequin, being convinced of his would-be rival's identity, dismissed the subject, with an inward curse at the simple fellow's audacity.

"If 'tis Mariotti, he has, indeed, found his match," laughed the Duchesse, with a marked emphasis on the *if*. She had, at a glance, understood the intricate handling of this delightful comedy to be another proof of Lamballe's crafty imagination.

As she extended her hand, and the first harlequin bent to impress a kiss upon it, the great lady and her vassal exchanged two words.

'Ferdinand?'

"The same."

At a sign from the Duchesse he passed through to join the circle behind her chair.

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The Duchesse now leaned forward, with a dancing light in her eyes, towards the second harlequin.

She started back.

Those were the same eyes, she thought,—was her mind a little confused with the unexpected developments of the night?—the same eyes which had just now confronted hers. Perhaps the black mask accentuated the similitude. They were strangely alike, she thought.

“Welcome!” cried the Duchesse.

The second harlequin did not speak. He merely bowed.

As he lifted his head he looked straight up into the brooding puzzled orbs of that daring young Folly who had elected to remain outside the elect circle where “frolic was the watchword and honors were even.”

She retained her attitude of intent scrutiny.

“A rarely perfect night,” remarked the second harlequin in a whisper; his masked lips were close to her ear; “a night for leaps in the dark and lovers’ vows. Wilt go with me for a stroll, oh, lady of beauty?” Then, very low, “Don’t faint. It’s Jack!”

Folly gasped audibly. Then, being a woman and complex, she hurriedly detached a rose from some loose ones she carried in her hand and bestowed it upon her daring cavalier with an exaggerated flourish, her contribution to the night’s masked batteries.

The Duchesse’s party was absorbed with itself. The harlequin had been presented to Marie Antoinette. She was fanning herself in stately fashion as his supple body inclined before her.

When the Duchesse looked forth in search of the pilgrims at her gate, some moments afterwards, the second harlequin had basely deserted his post, and Folly’s twinkling heels had made the most of their mistress’s daringly exposed desire to meander.

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CHAPTER XVII

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THE two sped on, Folly in her gown which bespoke the mutinous wilfulness of its wearer, the harlequin in his fanciful portrayal of versatile force.

She had said one word, apprehensively, "Why?"

He has answered shortly, "Wait."

Her heart beat so she could hear it above the shouting and bustling of the crowd, above the lilt of the dreamy waltz's measure,—the refrain sounded loud in her memory in after-years,—above and far beyond the present agony of apprehension in her veins.

His left hand had fastened upon hers with a grip that made her shrink.

They stopped at last in a secluded corner of the garden, a bosquet screened by a stone wall covered with ivy. It made a background for the two figures which stood against it as individual will is thrown out in spite of itself, at times, through the accident of circumstance.

There was no sound but the drip of the fountain some steps away.

An itinerant moonbeam escaped through a slit in two fleecy clouds and made its way across her.

Her figure stood out, in all its womanish avowal of coquetry, triumphantly revealed as perfection.

Her face drooped visibly.

For the first time in her life she was afraid.

"Take off your mask," Conway's voice commanded. The words came as though his vocal chords had tightened in a spasmodic stricture.

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She remembered, in a faint, half-thought-out fashion, that somewhere lately she had heard those peremptory words, that command,—under totally different auspices, however. She did not stop to question when, or where, or from whom. It had been a memory with a singular accompaniment of distaste for her. Now it was all different.

She lifted her exquisite arms obediently and unfastened the clasp from under her curls.

She did not raise her eyes. Somehow she could not.

He stood looking at her.

Such a gaze !

If life could blot up in an hour all that look was endeavoring to assimilate in a second, time were vain, and love a farce.

“Will you not speak to me?” The young voice was charged with a sternly evaded element of revolt.

It held the echo of an enforced renunciation.

She stirred restlessly. She would have given her right hand just then to have dared.

“I ask you,” he went on, most miserably, “why you will not look at me?”

Still she was silent.

Then very slowly—as though in the act she was striving to conceal a mortal illness which was gradually stealing over her bit by bit, she fighting it inch by inch—she lifted one hand, off which she had dragged the glove a moment before, and laid it with its back across her tell-tale eyes.

The acknowledgment of weakness the gesture betrayed was supreme.

He saw a curled, rosy, satin palm with a mouth below it which might have been God’s model for His rosebuds, he thought, tumultuously.

“I want—to—hear—you—speak.”

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She knew she must answer. Her conscience told her that this was to be an unequal battle, in which she must fight for two instead of for one. But she had been wishing for the sound of his voice for forty-two hours ; and for one moment she hesitated, because she knew that when she spoke that she must slay.

Oh, why was it her portion to undo, to kill, what seemed so perilously worth keeping? A line of Browning's drifted across her brain. Her brain? Was it a brain, or only another medium of the Almighty with which to coerce misery? The lilted words sifted through her awakened vanity—gold pollen across a ripening field.

“How sad, and mad, and bad it was,
And yet how it was *sweet*.”

A little while,—a very little while. Just all her life, it seemed to her,—wherein she lived through a shamed admission with a staggering conviction of its mighty import,—in which she seemed to leap with a bound to the right-about. In which she seemed to be looking back upon a determination which blasted and quenched. The scourge of guilt might be upon her unless she pushed it off.

Her voice came haltingly. He bent to listen.

The words were—oh, the inefficacy of vocabulary with which to express thoughts that must mean so much !

She said, “I thought Stephen could—trust—you.”

That was all.

The flood-gates had rolled back.

She was in the open sea again, in her own boat,—alone,—tired out ; facing a stretch horizonless, colorless, perhaps ; unattainable surely ; but she held the tiller.

Her heart fell on its knees to Conway, in supplication that he might forgive the anguish she must—it was her

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duty—cause him. Her soul lit up in an ecstasy of exaltation towards her Maker, in prayerful acknowledgment of a strength that had all at once been given her.

The tears gushed into her eyes. Already her conscience's penitential pearls were afloat; but were they tears of relief, or came they from an overpowering sense of loss?

She turned abruptly, and walked a little way from him.

He was standing motionless, as though turned to stone.

"Cowardly!" she broke forth all at once. As though her former words had carved a way for her speech, and she must profit off it as mercilessly as she dared, she flashed out, "Why have you returned?"

A breathless pause. It throbbed. Then,—

"Yes: yes. Ah,—*hush!*"

The abject misery of the hoarse, boyish voice.

She had started to speak again. He had checked her at last.

And then she turned and looked at him.

The expression of her face cut him to the heart. In his mad seizure of a chance which he had come to believe must guide the hand of fate—this side issue as the secret cause for his own unbridled temerity—his biased reasoning had never imagined the possibility of her contempt. He had thought perhaps she, too, might see as he had seen; might think as he had thought. She, too! There had been no evil in the thought,—only that awful yearning to see her face, to hear her voice.

Oh, fool! Was there no line in her features but that line of invincible scorn. What should he ever do to obliterate that look? It would remain with him as long as life. That his mad self-love should have stamped it there!

"I will explain," he began, hoarsely.

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"Do so," peremptorily. The retort cast on his repentance's track a damning stain of doubt.

"My coming was imperative," he ventured.

His pallor was startling. His features looked of chiselled ice as he stood there endeavoring to prove he was not the coward she had elected to suppose.

A coward—he?

His inflexible accuser—she?

Oh, the pity of it! The thought was born, grew, and was old, worn, hopeless in a second,—that she would never understand. Cowardice had proved itself from him to her.

Her cold look was piercing his sore soul like a point of jagged iron.

"Tell the truth," she advised most bitterly; "tell me the truth." And as he hesitated, torn between his torturing self-acknowledgment of bitterness new-born and acute, she said, "You cannot tell it because you are afraid. You came, because you could not remain away."

As she made the affirmation with much bitter apparent contempt, she knew that if he denied, her most exultant consciousness of power lay still forever.

Silence.

He did not deny. He did not confirm. She had turned her eyes away as though he were unworthy for them to rest upon. At least so he translated it.

In reality she was almost beside herself at the havoc she seemed, with each cruel word, to impose.

"I came," he blurted out, "to find Lamballe. I had reason to believe he was in Paris. It was a thing which must be verified,—one way or the other. The knowledge," monotonously, blind fury growing apace in him that she would not believe, "will aid our cause mightily."

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Just the same distant expression of polite incredulity on the fair face which had once been so winsome and bonny for him and every one.

"And your curiosity has been gratified?"

The meaning her tone conveyed was clear. She did not believe him.

All at once he went a little mad, the way men do when young and hopeless, towards the woman who enjoys tormenting them. He strode forward, and clutched her hand in his with a fierce clutch which made her gasp. She did not cry out. She bore. She felt this might, in some slight measure, offset her seeming cruelty. Would he ever recognize she had been kind to him? His face was close to hers, close, closer. His breath was against her cheek. She felt the powerful young figure against her gown.

She struggled a little. Then she was very still.

If it were a battle of anything but spirit she might lose, she thought.

"When you have done," broke forth her stinging voice, finally, "I will tell you why you are here."

He let her hand fall with a moan.

"You came because you wished to see—*me*," continued the merciless voice. The words beat on his listening senses like hammers on a gaping wound.

"Well?" he returned, doggedly.

He had lifted his head. He was confronting her boldly. The shame over the mad course he had chosen had gone out for him, swallowed up in a mighty recognition of her incarnate cruelty. He hoped, bitterly, it did her good to say those hateful words. He knew they hurt him mortally. He did not seek to vindicate himself. His heart's secret was revealed in one word. She had spoken the truth. Why, longer, deny it?

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"It was cowardly," she said.

She knew no other word, possibly, he thought, in a dazed fashion. Why so? Well! Perhaps the term was just. It was, too, conclusive.

As a final effort she now replaced her mask with shaking fingers.

He did not know it; but she knew she was locking in, until some blessed period when she could think things out, the tears, the sense of guilt, the rest. All the rest. She would have time to take it out some day and think it well over, she thought.

He swept her from head to foot with a look which made her turn cold; a glance which, in its crude acceptance of her final decree, she had not preimagined.

"To prove that what you say is untrue I will leave you to-night forever," he said, in a dull, monotonous voice, she had never heard before from him.

She started involuntarily. How glad she was of her mask,—how glad! For her lips were stiffening against her will. "What heroics are these?" came to her out of her store of platitudes. But she did not voice them. Instead she waited apprehensively. "Forever," she thought, lamely, gropingly, "is a long time."

"I will never see you again," continued the young voice with its burden of impotent despair. "Will you bid me God-speed?"

She laughed.

He could scarcely believe his ears. Then he thought this must be another form of chastisement,—a forefend of unmistakable expiation. He had made a false step. He must abide by the consequences. Other men had.

"I bid you to come no more," she ejaculated, with another wild laugh. "You must have been mad to have come at all."

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"Am I mad?" he returned instantly, in a famished, stifled tone,—there came a dull thudding in her ears; she seemed to be beating it off with her thoughts,—“am I mad to wish to bid so sweet a thing as you good-by?”

"Oh, go!" she cried.

The place was slipping from her—with him. She stooped and gathered up a corner of her skirt with one hand,—anything to start the blood which seemed to be coagulating in her veins; the mesh had caught in a rose-bush which stood near surrounded by palms and plants.

"It is well," she said, softly, slowly, and very distinctly.

But with all the clearness of her words there lay, alongside of her summing up, so evident a weight of conscious woe that for the moment his heart bounded, just for one ecstatic second. Then he spoke.

"It was weak," he admitted, tentatively.

"More," from her, mercilessly.

"It was dastardly,—a subterfuge." He knew in his heart that the subterfuge had been hardly equivalent to the emergency which had induced it; but he was thinking that, so long as she thus cruelly misjudged his ulterior motive, he would not withdraw from one iota of his merited chastisement.

"There is always, Stephen——," she broke forth, abruptly. Aye. There was the rub. "Otherwise——"

"But I was human," he pleaded, lamely, huskily.

"Oh—that!" Words evidently failed his judge with which to advocate wisdom in case of a subsequent deplorable, like weakness.

"Good-by," she added very low, as if by rote, mechanically.

He began hoarsely again, "I hope you will remem-

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ber," he said, "I would not have caused you pain for all the world."

"Oh, why did you come?" she cried, in a strangled, unguided voice.

There was a pause.

"I think," he answered, as if he had not heard her,—his conscience was awakening to the touch of a groping thought which once his will had bowed to somewhere—this sense of slack—as the opportunity out of which to prove himself a man or a knave,—“if I do not return, some day you will forget I was a coward once?”

She did not answer.

One hand of hers was wringing the other in helpless fashion among the folds of her gown.

He drew himself up with the old familiar movement of unalterable resolve. He had turned from her, after a flashing glance in which he had striven to imprint the record of her, body and soul, on his abnormally illuminated memory.

The little figure that was not his,—that never could be; the creamy arms; the neck full-chested, with all its royal promise of maturity fulfilled, the outline of a womanliness unmistakable.

He looked out ahead with a curious light in his eyes,—out past something she could not see. Was it the phantom of the to-come? Was it the forerunner of his mortal pain?

She could not tell. Dumbly, blindly, hopelessly, she could not tell. She must not ask.

She saw the dauntless face with its Spanish coloring impregnated by an alarming pallor; it seemed to her that she had imprinted it there. She saw the young figure in all its manly beauty. She knew its reckless energy, its overpowering sense of what was right and just.

Yes—just!

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“Good-by, love,” he whispered, loudly, sharply, with a queer blind gesture, as though putting gently away from him forever the right to his soul’s happiness.

Then her will broke up.

With a helpless, choked cry, supreme in its confession of abject abandon, she ran forward.

He was gone.

She tore off her mask. Her face, blistered, outspoken, betrayed the disorder her own unguarded vanity had sown, and would reap.

With an infinitely weary gesture she slipped, like a shadow, to the ground.

Was it an hour later? She did not know. Gradually the cool drip of the fountain surged in again; the distant sound of waltz music; memory; reason. She dragged herself to her feet.

Folly! That was her name.

Her eyes had fallen on her corsage with its display of magnificent gems; upon the soft flesh above it.

Then it all came back to her.

He would never know. It had been heart hunger; she had reached out. He had misunderstood. What a tangle life was!

And Stephen?

Oh, God—God!

Her duty came towards her as though out of a mist. She must put away from her the forceful, the free; and accept, in its stead, a reluctant makeshift named “affection.”

She rose painfully. She pushed her hair off her temples with trembling fingers. Then, her eyes wistful, her hands reaching out as though feeling their way through the dark, she went forward towards the rollicking maskers in the ball-room beyond.

A RETROSPECT

CHAPTER XVIII

A RETROSPECT

"I HAD scarcely hoped to be accorded so rich a privilege," murmured Lamballe, bending over the hand extended to him by Marie Antoinette, subsequent to the Duchesse's presentation.

The recipient of his marked compliment merely inclined her head silently in response.

She was striving to locate the speaker's voice. It seemed, to her, to possess a strain foreign to her chosen mental attitude of perfunctory courtesy. Where had she heard those tones with their ring of command before? What theme did they convey which, augmented by a commonplace, struck from her guarded heart's profoundest depths an answering chord?

The sensation contained an unpleasant element of pertinacity.

Mrs. Conway was a woman who contemplated life unflinchingly. The time was past, she considered, when she might expect; the folly of striving to live over again in her maturity the tumults and protests of her youth she relegated, through unusual dignity of character, to a recess upon which she bestowed scant attention. She was not, like the Duchesse, grandly benevolent. Neither did she live with the expressed intention of deriving the noblest interpretation from all things. Her wit was too keen to permit her to ignore the justice of retribution, her critical acumen too discriminating not to acknowledge shadow as much as sunshine. Her will had been efficacious in obtaining for her her present uniquely exalted position in society;

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but her tact had done more. Her wealth she recognized had been largely instrumental, too, in commanding place.

After long years of contact with the best intellect and talent of her generation she did not pose as a lover of humanity.

Rather as a receptor, who obscured her private opinion with discreet platitudes, and retained her individual creed without disclosing its tenets. It had even been said by persons who boasted of intimacy with her that Mrs. Conway contemplated life, and human nature, with disdain. But this would have been difficult to reconcile with her attitude of acquired calm. She was fond of saying that she derived benefit as well as amusement from the social world's frequentation. To her son, who had unconsciously made a study of this being who, up to a few weeks since, had exemplified his ideal of womanhood, the fundamental keynote of her character—that character which is the output of most high-bred women after thirty, a recreation composed of prejudices invoked, illusions destroyed, and ideals reorganized—was scepticism.

Mrs. Conway's moods were as evanescent as the tints in a mass of shifting sands. The sceptical note was the note with which her son could never be patient. It gently and firmly proclaimed a consciousness of superior judgment which fretted his vanity. He disliked it, too, because it seemed the element which summarily established a barrier between him and his best friend. He did not realize it to be an outcome of that substitute for happiness known as resignation, a thing acquired by patience and pain born of inevitable contact with transitory issues.

He felt it when the sapphire eyes were lifted to his with a faint suspicion of quizzical amusement in their depths. It had checked his confidences more than once. But when

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he endeavored to force it into more conspicuous being, it faded out as if a strong hand had quenched it with tried power.

This characteristic he considered a flaw in his mother's perfect nature, which he worshipped as nineteenth century-ana seldom worships its progenitor.

He objected to it because it seemed to him a proof that the bloom of her ideal had, in some mysterious manner, been damaged, once, away off in a past that he might not fathom. If he overestimated his mother's conquest of philosophy, she permitted it. Being a woman of her generation, she was nothing loath to shine resplendently for a time in the white light of her only child's approval.

She knew that in this her time would be short. That there would come the comparisons which betray the natural law of evolution : that the child is invariably the judge of the parent. She thought that by that bitter time her scepticism, faint and guarded as it was, must explain itself to him without her aid. She waited.

That acquired note had done so much for her. It was the offshoot from an inner consciousness which would not be stilled. It was her shield between her heart and the world's prying eyes and merciless judgments. She fenced with it lightly, gracefully, the world seldom suspecting itself of being the object of her almost imperceptible scorn. It enabled her to look impersonally, as she thought, at both sides of any question without committing herself to either. It was her hard note. But she rejoiced over it. It had been long in growing, shaping, taking its stand.

It was made up of revolt, misery, and lacerated sentiment. A poor solution this, perhaps, of a force which she refused to allow to dominate her. But the scepticism acted as a check in many instances, and was a distinct feature now,

A NEW RACE DIPLOMATIST

—an echo of that past which, with such unflagging diligence, she concealed.

She was accused of coldness. She never attempted to deny the impeachment. Rather she welcomed such a conclusion, with devout thankfulness that her rôle was so well played it had assumed a natural expression,—so natural that none suspected her to be the leading lady in the drama ; simply one of the on-lookers.

Society teaches an equivocation of realities, an expression of complete satisfaction, a more or less rank example of the instinct of self-preservation. So that when the harlequin addressed Mrs. Conway in a voice which set all the bells ringing in a corner of her soul which she thought grown over, this woman of the world, true to her colors to deny anything so complicated as an emotion, fenced with the feel of it, denied the chimes, and uttered a commonplace in return.

She supposed her interlocutor to be some friend of the Duchesse, a notability without doubt, since he had been so courteously requested to join their select circle.

“Why a harlequin?” she questioned, with a gesture designating the costume worn by her interlocutor. And then her voice died out ; a great astonishment crept over her with the acknowledgment that their consternation was mutual.

What strange effect was this which her mild response had produced upon her companion ?

He was visibly confused.

If Mrs. Conway had not witnessed his manner she would have gainsaid the assertion that her simple phrase could have produced so extraordinary a result.

She glanced at the Duchesse.

To her surprise she was, with undisguised anxiety, watching the effect of her friend's words upon the harlequin.

A RETROSPECT

Mrs. Conway could not believe her eyes.

Emotions are communicative. Her heart began to beat in wild thuds, such as it had not experienced for years.

The harlequin had collected himself mechanically. He stood still.

The eyes behind his black mask gleamed strangely, as though striving with all their might to pierce their neighbor's disguise.

Mrs. Conway, with a sigh of relief, became comfortably aware of her mask. Her heart beat regularly as she spoke again.

She repeated her question, permitting a faint cynicism to pervade it. "Probably a Frenchman," she was thinking, ironically, "in consequence, unduly responsive." Even in her secret heart she sternly clung to a dislike for the Latin race superinduced by long ago circumstance. "Why a harlequin," she demanded aloud, "unless the disguise conceals a spirit as many-sided as your variegated costume claims?"

Why, she was thinking to herself irritably, make so serious a matter out of a mere shadow of memory, in this night which the Duchesse had promised should bear as close as possible a resemblance to the mirthful epoch they had enjoyed together years ago?

His answer came slowly. It was fraught with acerbity.

"The human being, man or woman," said he, "who strives to be all that is required of him, all the characters his friends and comrades ascribe to him, all the feelings he conceals, all the emotions he refutes, all the joys he denies, must needs be a harlequin, indeed."

There was food for thought to be read between the lines. The insinuation pricked Mrs. Conway's retaliative faculty.

"You admit the heart of man capable of change then, Monsieur Harlequin," she retorted, lightly. "You are

A NEW RACE DIPLOMATIST

broader than most. Until now the world has been led to presume that woman, and woman solely, possesses the faculty of infidelity."

"Madame were less than a queen did she renounce her prerogative to jest," stated the harlequin, with more earnestness than the burden of his speech warranted. "Does she believe that man or woman changes? I, for one, deny it. Character, that is worthy of the name, lasts! 'Time changes? Potter and clay endure.'" He was quoting a line from a great English poet.

This was an anomaly, indeed. A Parisian with a cosmopolitan education was a novel departure, thought Mrs. Conway.

She smiled delightedly under her mask. This curious being had pointed his clean-cut speech directly at her. She had been less than a woman had her vanity not been flattered. She was silent.

She became conscious—sturdily aware as she was at one and the same time of the brilliant scene about her with its multitudinous suggestions, its fascinating toss of color, the couples whirling on the floor below in the mad abandon of the waltz, festive, fantastic—of an environment which she thought her memory had disowned, through the cogency of her vigilant will, forever.

The environment comprised a mental mirage,—a forest through which the sun shot in bars of molten gold. The tender trees stood forth lightly in their perfect garniture of spring green. It was morning, fresh, new-born. The grass-blades trembled, dew-stained, from the kiss of a light, perfumed wind. There was an indescribable fragrance of pushing buds, blossoms being caressed from nestling sleep to wakening courage, and with it all—words! Fiery, impetuous, passion-fraught, telling a love-story old as time and sweet as youth.

A RETROSPECT

She saw the stretch of years between this and that ; a long, colorless blank with only one glad figure in it,—her boy. She felt the old glamour well up and cry out. Once more came the love of conquest ; the desire for appreciation ; the disdain of everything but her heart's chosen god. She pressed it back again—a second habit—uncompromisingly. But it surged up as a weed floats to the top of a summer sea, and looks through helplessly at the blue sky above,—between it and heaven only a volatile circumstance.

Through a subtle force inexplicable—either from a familiar strain in the voice which had addressed her, or because Marguerite de Launoy sat there again by her side contemplating her with the same kind, understanding eyes with which she had gazed, when a young widow, at her friend's conquests, or by right of some plea hushed or unlistened to which sprang to life now, long after she considered it buried and done with—a forked consciousness grew apace, defying will, betraying rank growth,—a power which would not be stilled nor smothered.

Side by side she saw the girl she had been and the woman she was.

The thought grew and strengthened.

She saw a child with life's morning in her eyes and soul ; glad, eager ; possessed of all the pitiful sophistry of the unformed and receptive.

She saw, again, a woman, carrying the burden of an unflinching resolve,—to shield her secretly invincible pain at any cost : the pain of having been despised—and forsaken.

Had her interpretation been a wise one ? She could not tell. She only knew she had been sadly young to have had her hopes so ruthlessly denied, her heart so wantonly betrayed.

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He had left her. He had not returned. There had been no word.

Then she had confronted the long stretch of years, and had been afraid. She had accepted an apology for happiness instead of clinging to her girlish faith that each man or woman has the right to genuineness.

She had ignored the truth that there is nothing between weakness and strength.

She had been afraid to live alone, unguided, beautiful no longer, unsought ; reluctant to watch her beauty ebb out unplucked ; fearful of that sense of loss which drained her joy-duct diurnally with diligence and pertinacity ; averse to acknowledge the wound of an abused pride which made her despise herself.

So she had married. Without a sense, until too late, of the gravity of the vows she had taken upon herself. Only as a distraction.

She had thought her dream would fade. But gradually she came to know that the more she fought against it the more it augmented. It afforded her material everlasting for comparison,—a comparison which dulled the present and fired the past. As the faces of the dead assume to the living a majesty which they have never borne in life ; as the inequalities of character fade with tender memory's allegiance to beauty, so her dream, in spite of her, had ever remained a distinct reality. It contained a revulsion of feeling which she had striven vainly to defeat. It possessed, too, the conviction that Ferdinand Lamballe had been her heart's affinity, and none other. This in spite of his cruelly inexplicable conduct.

And she was old.

The past had come ebbing back with the insistence of a child's voice or a bird's song to remind her that her chance of happiness had fled.

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She had thought herself numb. She! Her day was past. Like so many others, she had had her opportunity, and missed it, through no fault of her own. She had wished to grasp a rose. Instead, her soul had encompassed a thorn which tore her spirit's flesh and lacerated it, and, at last, sickened her.

Had it seemed as pure as milk and honey *because* it had proved futile?

She could not tell.

She only knew that she had loved. And she had lost.



CHAPTER XIX

UNMASKED

"THERE is a favor I wish to ask of you," broke forth the Duchesse. "It is that all of you, my dear friends, will remain to sup with me. We will unmask."

"Happy thought!" responded the harlequin.

He, too, had been silent, dimly conscious of a wave of feeling which was threatening to engulf him. But his imagination had discovered no solution of his inward disturbance. That indescribable sensation stood stripped of anything but the immeasurable longing that his neighbor might speak once more.

At a sign from the Duchesse the little group now rose, and made way for itself through the ranks of waltzers and maskers towards a supper-room below, decked out in garlands of roses. They drooped from a crown in the middle of the apartment surmounted by the de Launoy crest to the four corners of the room, where they were caught up with tufts of feathery ferns.

A NEW RACE DIPLOMATIST

As they passed the Duchesse drew Mrs. Conway into her private apartment, ostensibly to remove her mask.

As it was lifted, and the sapphire eyes were revealed,—oddly melancholy eyes those for the orbs of a reigning sovereign,—the Duchesse spoke.

“I crave your forgiveness, dear friend, for a scheme of which I have been guilty,” she began, agitatedly concerned with the message her remark conveyed.

“A ‘scheme’?” The reiteration was politely inquisitive.

“I feel like a conspirator ; but it seemed there was no other way,” continued the Duchesse, impetuously. “My intentions were of the best, although they may, in the light of subsequent events, appear to the contrary.”

Mrs. Conway permitted a bewildered expression to flit across her features. “Continue,” she begged. She looked at the Duchesse with a set expression which harbored an apprehension.

“Madeleine, what would you think if I told you that to-night I had purposely brought you into contact with an old friend?”

“A friend?” with the old, faint scepticism.

“Surely,” confided the Duchesse, “‘a friend.’ Perhaps I have been unwise in assuming so great a responsibility without consulting either you or your inclination ; but I felt that possibly the years which have intervened might have softened for you and him the memories which must lie between.”

“Him !”

The word was breathed, not spoken. The blue eyes, with their limitless pellucid depths, were wide, startled, fearful. The head, with its crown of snow-white hair, was lifted like a stag that hears the approach of her assassin through the underbrush.

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“Ferdinand Lamballe.” The voice was the Duchesse’s, clear, forceful.

There was no sound save the distant hum of the throng some rooms away.

Then Mrs. Conway spoke. A quiver had passed across her features. Her lips were so dry they hardly let forth her words distinctly.

“A cousin,—or nephew, perhaps?”

She was willing, with a wonderful calm born of the moment’s desperate pain, that her heart’s weakness should not betray her at this supreme test. She had heard that name often within the past few weeks ; and she had steeled herself to hear it without giving evidence of the tortured valve it set swinging. In the last two months’ mercurial evolutions, necessitating a change of home, of views, of substances, that memorable name had been mentioned more than once, both by her son and Stephen Markoe. She supposed it an accidental similarity of nomenclature. The real Ferdinand Lamballe for years she had thought—she could not have told why—dead.

“Neither a cousin nor a nephew,” replied the Duchesse, instantly, with emphasis. “The same Ferdinand Lamballe, Madeleine, whom you and I knew when we were young.”

“Young ! Yes.”

They were only two words, but the Duchesse’s eyes filled.

The utterance was a complete revelation of the quenched anguish of a woman’s heart.

“Have I been imprudent?” asked the Duchesse, moving forward to take in hers her friend’s two hands. One of them—pitifully enough—had stretched forth to steady itself against a neighboring fauteuil.

“Imprudent ! Why ?”

A NEW RACE DIPLOMATIST

There was to be no withdrawal from the heroic rôle—she had played it so well until now—of indifference, of disdain.

“I thought, perhaps,” ventured the Duchesse,—how pathetic was Madeleine Conway’s haughty face in its effort to hold back its story!—“I thought that you might suffer.”

She said the word deliberately ; conscious that, to be kind, she must strike home.

Her daring did its work—to rouse.

Mrs. Conway, with decision largely composed of reserve, drew a little away from her friend with an indescribable expression.

“Suffer,” she repeated slowly, still wearing her air of ironical scepticism. “Ferdinand Lamballe? Suffer !”

The Duchesse could not tell whether the word registered a confirmation or quite otherwise.

She was silent.

Then she stepped across the room to ring and give an order.

When this had been accomplished, and, some ten minutes later, she turned towards the regal presence in its Marie Antoinette robes, the sapphire eyes were cold, the expression was, as usual, calm.

Mrs. Conway was herself again.

They wended their way through the crowded halls by a path made for them by a domestic attired in the de Launoy liveries. After being thus piloted through numerous passage-ways, they finally were ushered into the Duchesse’s private supper-room.

The apartment was already occupied by the members of that select circle Marguerite de Launoy had purposely gathered around her for the feast to come.

The Princess was chatting with Lamballe, under a cluster of lights in one corner of the room. She was a woman who

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had roused even the Pope's admiration by her audacity, her frank interest in cosmopolitan issues, and a taste in dress which, years before, had become proverbial.

The English Ambassador was exchanging ponderous efforts at repartee with a feminine compatriot who had recently made her mark in London literary circles through an onslaught upon matrimony,—an attack which she refused to retract with all the delightful inconsistency of a pretty woman with a mission,—which she might, or might not, substantiate.

"You push the plank from under our feet," the Ambassador was saying, plaintively, "and you give us nothing to take its place. How like a woman!"

"Is it not?" blandly returned the new authoress of ways and means hitherto undreamt of in even her own philosophy, with an inconsequence which savored of superficiality. She had a complexion of milk and roses, forget-me-not eyes, and an enchanting expression of innocence. If her matrimonial experiences, which were said to be hopelessly entangled, had crowded out her deductive faculty, the result was quite inevitable, considering.

"I beg to present you all," said the Duchesse, impressively,—the little company had turned as she entered, the two regal figures in their sumptuous robes sparkling with gems were in exquisite contrast to the sombre room with its armorial panels and Florentine carvings,—"to my friend Mrs. Conway. *L'Americaine la plus charmante qui existe*,—and that is not too much to say."

As Lamballe moved forward from a rally with the Princess, which had left him mentally floored for the time being, his flashing eyes missed the flicker of almost uncontrollable trepidation which played across the features of the woman who occupied so prominent a position under the electric bulb, in the centre of the room.

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But, as they gradually accustomed themselves to the glare, and with it the sumptuous circumstance which was thus submitted to his scrutiny, his heart leaped. Then it ached.

He knew.

Without a flickering line his memory darted out, and claimed the familiar substance of those memorable sapphire eyes ; that queenly presence ; those features so delicately traced, with their air of haughty reserve. Above the hair was, frankly undisguised, piled in masses like a crown of snow.

Her hair had been golden.

With another leap his spirit spanned the years. A moment had come which he had not anticipated. The volatile flux of his imagination in all its ebb and flow had never, in its acknowledgment of loss, fraud, self-revelment, thought to be overcome by this thing which brought in its train such an indescribable medley of forgotten sensations.

"The Princess Mennerlich," continued the Duchesse, clearly,—she had seen Lamballe's face and knew her stewardship, for the time, was over. "My friend, Mrs. Arkwright, who has unearthed from perfidious Albion's social green-room a cancerous growth for which she must find the cure," with a humorous smile ; "my comrade and neighbor, Monsieur Nordensköld," presenting the Swedish attaché ; "and my lifelong friend, the dramatist, Ferdinand Lamballe."

"A great pleasure," said Lamballe, simply, bowing low.

Mrs. Conway did not answer.

With a glance she, too, had registered the changes in the patrician face so oddly at variance with its chosen costume of harlequin.

But the voice was the same, musical, instinctively com-

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manding. And the sombre eyes which remained unlit to-night? She had seen them flash and blaze,—conflagrations which she had ignited.

At the table the conversation was desultory at first. The coming play was discussed and dismissed. "Time enough to-morrow," said Lamballe, shortly, inwardly wondering what his sensation would be if Mrs. Conway witnessed his triumph.

Strangely enough, after the first throb which rent asunder a wound he fancied healed, or at least dormant, he was experiencing a curious sense of repose, a restfulness he had not imagined in years.

In spite of everything, here was a woman who understood him. She had been frail, but of a rare intelligence. Little things came back to him as he listened, without appearing to do so, to the low tones of her voice as she carried on a conventional conversation with her neighbor, Nordensköld.

How sweetly she had changed! In spite of the crown of snow which gave her the air of an old miniature, which augmented rather than took from her beauty, her features were the same,—icily perfect. The fair face seemed as though Time had passed over it lightly, unwilling to lay its impress on either such blue-lined temples or delicate cheeks. The natural sequence, thought Lamballe, bitterly, of a cold temperament.

But the bitterness passed out of him,—a breath from the mirror of memory. In its place came a question which hammered at his heart's portal insistently.

Why?

Had it been ambition? The question insinuated itself between his graceful persiflage with the Princess; between his shafts of irony and wit in response to the Duchesse, through his intellectual expansion under the warm in-

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terest of the English Ambassador. Had ambition alone induced this woman to renounce her birthright of single-hearted devotion?

As the dawn crept through the shutters and paled the candlelight the Duchesse's guests withdrew, realizing the night was past and the new dawn begun.

She remembered but one thing. That she was old.

It was a germ that clogged her pulse, a check that reined her fancy taut, a fact that, with rugged insistence, quenched her courage.

The reacknowledgment had come to her with the sound of his voice. It set forward the hands on her mental clock-work instead of setting them back, as she could have wished. It was the burden of the night. She saw her name in the call-roll of the gone out; the condemned.

She had a merciless personal sense of the fitness of things.

In her stern retrospection she forgot that he, too, had passed down the years, and had remained unmarried.

Her imagination invested him with none of the charms for which other women loved him: his fame; his record; his manly patrician beauty; his proof of superior ability.

She remembered an eager young face with a love-light upon it which seemed to her to have descended from a heaven made for them alone. She heard the musical voice which had ebbed out for her—and to-night flowed in—throbbing with how faithful an effigy of truth!

He lifted his hat as he conducted her to her carriage. The gray lines of care in his face shone out under the dawn's cold emphasis. They held the visible drain baldly captive. Unflattering evidence, indeed, of the superfluous energy which had been expended with the years!

As Mrs. Conway rolled out into the Champs-Élysées towards the needle of the Eiffel tower which pierced the pinkening eastern sky, the dome of Napoleon's tomb yellowing

A SIGNIFICANT FRUSTRATION

into a bulb of glorified prophecy as the sun crept up back of it, and threw it out, a gilded bubble, an innocent symbol of the love-flushed capital's wealth, she was wondering listlessly, hopelessly, bereft of either pride or will.

Wherefore?

His hand had crushed out her dawn for her ; his will, the rose of her pinkening sky ; his faithlessness, her sunshine.

She had chosen a bubble of gold, like that glistening over below there which registered a nation's loss, in place of a lifetime of bliss.

Her choice had exemplified, also, a tomb.

"Ambition," muttered Lamballe, as he threw himself into his coupé, and shivered under the sharp caress of the morning air. "Of that sin fell the angels."



CHAPTER XX

A SIGNIFICANT FRUSTRATION

MARKOE had long wished to study his antagonist at closer range. This opportunity would have been readily obtained had not Lamballe, faithful to his attitude of strictest seclusion, obstinately opposed so straightforward a solution of the Franco-American problem.

When one day the courteous director of the Français, at the express order of the President of the French Republic, forwarded the United States Ambassador a loge for the first night of the great play "Avoided," Markoe rejoiced that the coming representation would afford a *bonne-bouche* which, in his case, held a double-edged significance. The accident which thrust Lamballe into his supposed enemy's very jaws, nolens volens, tickled the latter's midriff, and prepared his receptive faculty.

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A servant stood at his elbow.

The Ambassador had been writing. He had not heard the discreet knock which preceded the interruption. He arrested his hand slowly, and detached his thoughts from the subject under pen discussion with difficulty. He had given special orders not to be disturbed. As he lifted his eyes impatiently they glanced across the liveried underling at a flash, to astonishedly grasp the conviction of a sturdy masculine figure, in fustian, standing on the threshold, with a dilapidated cap held clumsily between the fingers of a sunburned, toil-worn hand.

"Burgess!" ejaculated Markoe, dropping his pen.

"The same, sir."

The surveyor's tone was charged with deepest melancholy.

The Ambassador rose. He made a sign to his valet de pied to withdraw. That worthy obeyed orders, casting a suspicious glance at the figure on the threshold as he passed.

Markoe followed him to the door, closed and locked it deliberately, and then looked towards the surveyor with wordless impatience. He wondered at his dejected bearing. Burgess's was generally the complete satisfaction of a self-made underling.

"Out with it," ejaculated Markoe : adding, "My time is short. Did you take your bearings?"

"Aye, aye, sir ; clear as paint."

"And the chalk-pits?"

"There are no pits, sir. Those remain to be dug. The bank lays under ground, an' has remained unworked. It is covered with a cluster o' trees, a belt line o' green. The gravel covers that : the chalk is below it."

"Does it extend across the border?"

Burgess hesitated. He was visibly troubled.

"My time is short," reiterated Markoe, looking at his watch pointedly. He had heard a carriage drive into the

A SIGNIFICANT FRUSTRATION

court below. He knew his wife had gone to her room to don her evening toilet. They had consumed a late déjeuner, and had mutually decided to postpone solidier sustenance until after the play. He was not dressed. His valet had knocked, to remind him there was but ten minutes' leeway, some minutes since.

"I have a little matter ter relate which will cum unexpected ter yer, Mr. Markoe," Burgess let forth, with trepidation, at this period.

The Ambassador looked at him sharply. He had not been mistaken. The honest fellow was a victim of undeniable agitation. He was usually so stolidly at variance with emotion that Markoe contemplated his present state with considerable apprehension.

"Unexpected !" he repeated, slowly.

"Mister Jack sir," tentatively.

"Well?"

The retort direct was sharp. Markoe had not concerned himself with either the name or the man since last night, when his wife had professed her loneliness to be augmented by Conway's absence. His thoughts now reverted to a scene in that memorable interview of his with the head of the nation, in which he remembered a sentence of his own. "We will be obliged to treat with raw recruits as helpers, that is wherein the main difficulty will lie." He frowned. "What of Mr. Jack?" he inquired, coldly.

"He's gone, sir."

"Gone !"

The Ambassador wheeled around and contemplated his informant with a pair of incredulous eyes.

"If you'll give me five minutes, sir——"

"Ten," vouchsafed Markoe. "Go ahead." He looked at his watch, this time without recognizing the hour the hands registered.

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"We were two days at it, sir; I takin' bearin's an' Mister Jack keepin' watch-like. We had decided everything, except the point as ter how fur the chalk extended, when the night cum on, an' with it, a deluge! At six o'clock we went back ter the hotel an' took our dinner, prepared ter put in another day at it, weather permittin', later. I went oneasy-like after our meal was over. Mister Jack, sir, he got onter my oneasiness, an' nothin' would do but thet he should take my place. I argued and argued. He was a green hand, I am an old one; but Lord, sir, it wus jest like wavin' a red rag at a young bull. He scented the danger, an' he went off half-cocked in search of it. I had run across that day a couple o' coves who seemed to be spyin'. I tole Mister Jack about 'em. He would have it they were Lamballe's men, sir. There is parties who hang onter their own property like grim death," with a grin. "So when Mister Jack got onter it thet a malefactor discovered on private premises wus sent up fur three months in France, nothin' would do but thet he makes fur them premises, in the pourin' rain at night, ter be done fur. He wus done fur," with solemn emphasis.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he went, sir. He did not cum back. I waited fur him all night. When mornin' came, he had not returned. Since then I have scoured the country-side without discoverin' 'im nor his tracks. The valley looks as smilin' an' bland as a spring lamb. He went, sir, ter find out whether or no the chalk extended inter Germany or not."

The Ambassador was silent for a moment. Then he said, pleasantly, "That will do, Burgess."

Burgess, for answer, scratched his head and looked puzzled.

"Thank you, sir," he ventured mechanically, after a period of stillness which tried his patience mightily.

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"Go back to Carembourg," Markoe ordered presently, a new crispness pervading his authoritative manner. "Remain there until you hear from me."

"An' Mister Jack, sir?" anxiously.

"Ah," ejaculated the Ambassador, as though the thought had slipped from him and had suddenly been reawakened at the mild hint of his surveyor.

"He's too darin' sir," garrulously; "I allers said so. Reckless-like. We ole 'uns know a thing or two about bein' cautious. But them young 'uns. They allers runs their heads inter a noose."

"Considerable of a boy," mused the Ambassador, audibly.

"He ain't exactly thet, sir," ejaculated Burgess, blanching painfully now, and moving towards him sideways, crab fashion. His cap was being twisted out of shape. His chin had dropped. A hard, short breath came from behind his teeth in a panting sound like a dog that has been summarily lassoed. "There's more ter tell, sir," went on the surveyor, hoarsely. "I saw a light spring up in the young 'un's eyes last night thet looked as though he meant bizness. He wus took all uv a heap when I told him thet danger, real danger, wus in the air. Wot I blame myself now fur is thet I didn't warn him wot thet danger wus. Lamballe's men, sir, are dreaded like poisonous spiders. Their orders is, Show no quarter. Yer know wot thet means in Kentucky? It means the same in France. I got it a week sence straight frum an English groom who wus stayin' over a day with his hosses, detained cos somethin' wus wrong with his passport. Swearin' mad he wus too. He took it out cussin' Lamballe fur makin' the laws so stiff in them parts thet a cock robin can't hop across the border without bein' obliged ter pay a fine. 'Der yer want ter know wot punishment is meted out ter poachers in this blasted country?' sez he. 'Take the trouble,' sez he,

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'ter twist yer right leg over thet ere fence-rail yonder, jump down, walk fur the distance uv the sixteenth uv a mile straight ahead, an' see wot there is to see.' I follered his directions, sir," fearfully.

"Well?"

"It wusn't well, sir, it wus ill. I put in a pace or two towards probin' thet ere valley the first night we reached Carembourg, wen young Conway wus sleepin' like a suckin' babe. 'Twus moonlight. I'm an ole hand at gettin' me bearin's. I had 'em all in a matter uv four hours, as neat as though I wus wun uv them Prussian generals they tell on', who knew their ground a matter o' twenty years before they wus called ter fight on it, an' ruined France on thet strategy as much as a better trainin' o' discipline than most. Till thet night, sir, I thought we hed men ter deal with. The moonlight showed me our struggle wus ter be with beasts."

"What do you mean?" sharply.

"I swung me leg across the same fence-railin' as me English friend recommended, sir, an' walked ter where he designated. I wusn't expectant uv findin' anything more than a trap or a game-keeper. I found a corpse."

"A dog's?"

"No; a man's. Stale carrion with marks uv a week-old blud on it, a hole through his forehead thet cum frum the back, an' a couple uv rabbits tied ter a leash in wun hand. I stumbled over 'im thinkin' he wus underbrush. So he wus, sir; Lamballe's underbrush. He'd been shot down like a dog fur doin' no wus than appropriatin' sum game thet wus a creation uv the Almighty."

"It doesn't do to oppose the law, Burgess."

"There's them as calls murder illegal," retorted the surveyor.

"Did you inform Conway of your discovery?"

IN THE AMBASSADOR'S LOGE

"No, sir. I let him go off, thinkin' thet ignorance is bliss. I wus afeard thet if I squealed he might get rattled. If them Frenchmen has put cold lead inter him they'll hev ter answer fur it or my name ain't Tom Burgess."

"Conway knew his way?"

"No, sir." Burgess unaffectedly lifted his arm and drew his sleeve across his eyes.

"You may go, Burgess," said the Ambassador, after a little.

"But, sir, he may be rottin' there in the underbrush like a dead rabbit, instead uv the gallant young feller he is."

"There's only one thing to be done," said Markoe, peremptorily.

"Yes, sir."

"Go back to Carembourg."

"And you, sir?"

The Ambassador looked at his watch again, started, and closed the lid with a snap. He raised his eyes. There was a peculiar glint in them. "I am due in an hour," he said, reflectively, "at a meeting with Lamballe."

"I hope you'll get inter him as he deserves, sir."

"That's what we're here for, Burgess."



CHAPTER XXI

IN THE AMBASSADOR'S LOGE

It was a gala night in the famous house of Molière. All thinking Paris was present to hear and see the curious spectacle of a living fraud wittily rebuked by a master analyst.

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Lamballe albeit in theory a dramatist was in fact a moral draughtsman, who rejected lack of symmetry with the identical contempt an artist experiences when he discovers color the dominant note at the expense of fundamental principle. His introspective faculty was overcivilized. The butt of his irony to-night was Caracci, a far-famed specialist, who declared his method of cure infallible. For twenty years he had pursued a notorious career unchecked. Lamballe's critics did not misconstrue the dramatist's meaning like lesser beings who, through ignorance, might have attached the wrong value to appearances. The subject was presented with too earnest an understanding ; its intention, to benefit mankind, too apparent.

The curtain fell, after the first act, upon an indescribable tumult. The drift had been indomitable. The vast audience hummed and buzzed like a hive of bees. Each individual exercised his right to contest a subject whose existence until now he had unquestioningly accepted.

The dialogue had been especially pointed and sparkling. Audacity revealed itself in the undercurrent which aimed at demolishing an old god, humbug, in order to erect a new one, faith.

Caracci himself, plausible, immaculate, was to be seen in their midst, in evening dress, discussing cleverly, with a faint guarded smile on his thin lips, the reprehensible superficiality of the modern thinker. He was a man who was quoted to fold down the stiffening lids of his dead with the same imperturbability with which he now contemplated his critics.

Lamballe surrounded by his friends, courteously juggling with their most pointed innuendoes, and evincing a nonchalance throughout which called forth universal admiration, was slightly discomfited to receive a command from the loge of the United States representative to visit him in

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order that the American envoy might exchange views with, and make the personal acquaintance of, the most popular moral diagnostician of the day.

There was no answer but implicit obedience.

He crossed the foyer, on his way to Markoe's loge, to be waylaid half a dozen times in the act, much to his secret irritation.

"You have scored me temporarily, *mon cher*," cooed Caracci, with his smooth smile; "but the advertisement may offset the offence." There was considerable venom in his premeditated attack.

"*Que voulez-vous?*" responded the dramatist, with a shrug. "The world demands a *douche*. It is but natural it should criticise its *doucheur*!"

The tone was as inexorable as stone. The aristocrat confronted the charlatan unflinchingly. Caracci winced. His vaunted science dwindled to its true value. Notoriety may be considerably nonplussed by the secret consciousness that one thoughtful human being has pierced its flimsy disguise. He stood back instinctively before that calm, far-seeing gaze. It shone with the light of justice repudiative of judgment and mercy. There had been a quiet humor in the look which said, "Why mask you insufficiency, comrade; are we not all human?"

Ambassador Markoe's loge was the proscenium on the right-hand second tier. As Lamballe entered some of its inmates passed him on their way out. There were a number of personages about Mrs. Markoe's chair. They prevented the new-comer from attracting the notice he would otherwise have instantly commanded. Chatting with Markoe was a profusely decorated notability holding a high position at the Court of St. Petersburg. At his left was the well-known director who had been the innocent means of promoting the present encounter. He whispered

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Lamballe's name in the Ambassador's ear. Markoe rose, and came forward with marked impressiveness.

"I have to thank you for a new experience," he said.

Lamballe bowed.

"A great play, monsieur," went on the Ambassador in singularly pure and flexible French. "You are to be feared by them who hold high places, it appears."

"Monsieur is too kind to be quite just."

Lamballe confronted his host with a perceptible determination not to be outdone by his amiability. The ambiguity of his response was not lost upon Markoe.

"Is it a French custom to thus expose a weakness which governs mankind," he inquired lightly; "the weakness of adjudging itself all-powerful?"

"Mankind should govern," returned Lamballe, with ironical brevity.

"Quite so. But how about those men who are made to obey laws, monsieur, instead of to make them?" returned the Ambassador, with a responsive gleam in his eye.

"There are laws and laws," vouchsafed Lamballe evasively. He stooped to detach a piece of drapery from the sword of a military officer who stood near him vainly striving to withdraw, with grace, from the diplomatic circle, after having made his adieux to his hostess. Lamballe continued, lifting his eyes to those of the Ambassador, as if to enforce the meaning of his words: "There are also men—you by this, sans doute, have perceived as often as I—who are born to enforce the rules which other men break."

His face was impenetrable as he gave vent to this statement blandly. Markoe felt his spirit leap at the covert insinuation he imagined it contained, like the coat of a thoroughbred to the flick of the whip.

The crowd which, till now, had surrounded Mrs. Markoe's chair fell back.



"I HAVE TO THANK YOU FOR A NEW EXPERIENCE," HE SAID

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The new Ambassadors bowed in response to Lamballe's profound inclination. At an inviting gesture from her gloved hand he seated himself at her side.

"You are treating us to a charming evening, Monsieur Lamballe," she was pleased to affirm in her sweet voice. "I confess I almost fear you. With pitiless truth you are exposing a state of things which Paris had done more wisely to ignore."

"Human nature, madame, must ever bear the consequences of its own imprudence."

"The imprudence of believing too much in itself! You are harsh."

The low voice was reproachful. The delicate face was set like a white cameo against the crimson curtains which fell behind it. The Ambassador was attired in a severely simple gown of black velvet. She wore no ornament, with the exception of a huge diamond star which held her magnificent coils captive above the forehead, from which her hair rolled back sumptuously.

Lamballe regarded her piercingly. She returned his gaze coldly. Her critical acumen was not to be biased by her appreciative faculty,—an attribute which Lamballe remembered to be a peculiarly charming characteristic of American womanhood.

"There are wheels within wheels," he explained, a little shortly. "It would be difficult for a foreigner—even of unusual intelligence—to grasp the hundred and one shades which shift and elude one another in Paris inner circles. If my poor attempt has given you a moment of diversion, its mission is already accomplished."

The manner was perfect. The words conveyed the meaning that this remarkable Frenchman, true to his inherited faith that woman is the inferior animal, did not propose to discuss his motives at large.

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The insinuation nettled Mrs. Markoe. She was accustomed to being taken very seriously indeed.

"I think," she protested, icily, "you must do me the honor of considering that I understand the motive of your play, monsieur."

Lamballe glanced at her in a benevolent fashion for a moment. Then he returned the salute of a brilliantly attired feminine personage across the house. Both the salute and the slight expression of puzzled attention which preceded it were saturated with considerable weariness.

"Your play was not written for your own amusement, or for ours," pronounced the Ambassadress, heartily. "It was written with a purpose, monsieur, a noble purpose. I congratulate you!"

Responsiveness, unimpregnated with either self-interest or envy, was a quality seldom proffered Lamballe. He had not half realized how uncommon the sensation—subsequent upon its unfolding—might be, nor how sweet, until now.

His face flushed to the roots of his hair. He could but bow lower over the frank little gloved hand extended towards him. Curious people, these Anglo-Saxons, with their reserve, so peculiarly offset by spontaneity.

"Madame est trop aimable. Madame, from the richness of her own kind heart,—and what so generous as youth?"—with a swift glance of respectful admiration,—"too generously judges me as she herself would ask to be judged. I am deaf," humorously, with a dancing twinkle which died instantly like a spark with a short life. "If I am also silent, it is because I have not the heart to dispute so generous a criticism."

"Tell us, Lamballe," interrupted a clever young attaché from the English Embassy approaching them, as two more visitors were ushered into the loge, and the inmates were

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thus crowded forward, "your play is intended as a direct thrust at Caracci,—n'est-ce-pas?"

"Que veux-tu, mon cher?" returned Lamballe. He denied nothing. He contented himself with listening. It seemed as if his own play were being revealed to him. "Caracci has had his own way for half a century. It is but natural that I, a contemporary, should discover a flaw in his methods. I am not the most pronounced of conservatives as regards tradition. The law of progress must be encouraged, not rebuked. The young ones have their grievances. It is but fair that I should speak for them."

"Ah! You are voicing New World sentiments now, monsieur," broke in Markoe's vibrant voice. The Ambassador had moved towards them silently. Lamballe started. "Progress, then, you do espouse? A la bonne heure. The scales begin to fall from my eyes. Why is it that I have been so many weeks in Paris and that this is the first time I have had the honor to meet so enlightened an individual?"

The question was bluntly delivered. Lamballe answered it with the utmost nonchalance.

"Pardon me : I evaded monsieur."

Markoe gazed at his bidden guest imperturbably. "You did me the honor to avoid me. Did you, then, fear me?"

There was a quizzical light in Markoe's queer, colorless eyes which set off the shrewd lines which framed them.

"I confess that the dread I experienced was not fear, monsieur," returned Lamballe, with a subtle smile.

"Lack of interest, perhaps?" pleasantly. The Ambassador apparently considered indifference a natural attribute in so pampered a dilettante.

"I would scarcely name myself guilty of so discourteous a quality. Let us admit that nous autres Parisians are a trifle lukewarm in our cosmopolitan interests,—more's the pity. We are proverbially self-sufficient. We have not yet

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learned to grow as fast as you have. Does the law of expansion extend to your sympathies as well as to your borders? It would seem so, since you are pleased to understand me better than most."

Did the remark disguise a challenge? Or did it contain solely the frank expression of an outspoken gratitude?

"The American nation has more than once been made aware of your distaste for it, Monsieur Lamballe," remarked the Ambassador, coolly.

This was carrying the war into the enemy's territory with a vengeance. To Lamballe, the courage displayed in the attack was preëminent. It was a straight-from-the-shoulder policy which he had never learned to employ.

He felt as though he had been fretting over cribbage with a person who had never attempted anything more scientific than a game of marbles. The American embodied a new race from his inscrutable eyes—which at a glance seized, considered, and dismissed—to his patent-leather-clad feet, one of which was beating an impatient tattoo upon the floor.

Markoe added, "Although I am the United States representative I refuse to be disliked, monsieur. I decline to be ignored. I came here to-night to make the acquaintance of the man who dares to throw down the glove before his fellows for humanity's sake rather than in behalf of his personal interests. Yours is a New World prerogative. I regret the pleasure I experience may not be mutual. I confess I still hope it may be. Were you more generally known among us we would consider it a privilege to uproariously acclaim so royal a plea for principle. Yours is the courage of the common soldier, who is willing to die unknown so long as his flag waves triumphant!"

The words were glowing, concise, emphatic.

Lamballe's eyes flamed. He felt his prejudice melting

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like ice before the sun in this, his maiden encounter, with virile common sense.

"It is a great nation, the new nation," he ejaculated, a vivid light breaking across the settled sadness of his fine face. "It possesses one characteristic which the coming generation of Latins seek to put out,—what with its prevailing habit of unfaith,—its name is trust."

Markoe had seated himself. He had lifted his elbow over the back of his fauteuil, and was sweeping the house with his glasses.

"Yes. We trust—until we have been deceived," he replied, nonchalantly.

This time his own words were ambiguous.

A dull knocking was heard. It was the signal—an old-time tradition at the Français—that the curtain was about to rise.

Lamballe started hurriedly to his feet.

He hesitated.

"Shall we call a truce and make friends, monsieur?" suggested he, pleasantly. He was evidently off his guard completely. His manner exemplified the open-hearted ardor of a great child.

The Ambassador accompanied his guest to the door of the loge as, after making his adieux to Mrs. Markoe, he advanced towards the exit.

"A truce by all means. Who would not call a truce with a man of your calibre, Lamballe?"

Lamballe shook his angular shoulders with a peculiar gesture, as though freeing them from a yoke. He smiled, sceptically.

"'Calibre,'" he repeated, dubiously. "A calibre into which the world has poured the iron, monsieur."

"'Our deeds are fetters that we forge ourselves,'" murmured Markoe, the shrewd lines about his colorless eyes

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deepening. He was gazing absently at the group about his wife's chair, although he stood with the door swung open, ushering out his illustrious guest.

Lamballe began to speak ardently, impetuously. The past night had set a song agog in his soul which would not be silenced. This evening's curious coincidence seemed the sequel of that meeting with Madeleine Farragut which, although it had strained his patience, had thrown the old question into a new groove. He felt alert, more alive than he had been for years.

Appreciation sometimes loosens the fetters of endurance, and sets it swinging to a majestic measure fraught with delight.

He threw off caution, suspicion, conviction. Eager, recklessly lending himself to the invincible charm of an intellectual equal, he ended, "Had you known me when a boy, monsieur, I venture to say you would be astonished at the man I have become."

"Yes," returned Markoe, unresponsively. As Lamballe's ardor increased his own spontaneity died out.

"Écoutez !" cried Lamballe, radiantly,—he was pushing his way out, the crowded corridors were emptying as the throng made its way back into place, his eyes gleamed, his noble face was the picture of a magnanimous soul which is eager to pay its debt with compound interest,—“I think we shall be friends,” he said.

"Pardon me, the curtain is rising on your second act," returned Markoe, looking towards the stage.

BETWEEN DAYLIGHT AND DARK

CHAPTER XXII

BETWEEN DAYLIGHT AND DARK

"AT the Français last night," wrote Vodillet in a prominent morning newspaper, "the critical world was treated to a new order of old things. A man named Lamballe came to earth and, lifting his magic wand, endowed a cluster of human beings first with the listening quality, second with the receptive, and third with the enthusiastic. An interesting evening; an able dramatist; a forceful play. The sword of Damocles in 'Avoided' hangs by a hair over the heads of the audience and the players. Science, in 'Avoided,' is undone; inevitability is proven; fatuity discountenanced.

"'Avoided' treats of the great practitioner who is utilized by destiny to deny his own reckless promise to create out of human will a victor over death. It is a nail in the coffin of an esteemed contemporary who will yet confront the problem of 'Physician, heal thyself.' The title is, purposely, a misleading one. That the foremost character proclaims his failure, while appearing to evade it by succumbing to the inevitable, demonstrates the uncommon genius of the play's great author, who thus defies temporary extinction in assuming immortality.

"Lamballe has written many a play to astound his critics. His last bewilders them.

"The commonplace has been quoted both unenviable and irremediable.

"Notwithstanding, we can but bow our heads to this reverent spirit, which proves its case simply as a little child through the acknowledgment of immutable laws.

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We have in our midst a Daniel who seeks humbly and justly, with Divine aid, to extinguish the poisonous fungus of every unworthy growth."

"I go to Carembourg to-morrow," remarked Markoe, on his way home, to his wife. She drooped pallidly back in a corner of their brougham as they rolled up the Rue de Rivoli, across the Place de la Concorde, into the Cours la Reine. Beyond the river the ruins of the Tuileries seemed a ghost of past royalty,—its eyes gouged out.

"Ah, indeed," Mrs. Markoe answered, faintly. "Why?"

The Ambassador turned and looked at her. There were two marks, like brown velvet bruises, one under each long-lashed lid. Her eyes were closed. Listlessly she reclined, as though the weight of her lace-trimmed wrap were burdening her slight body with its over-garnishment. She reminded Markoe of some tropical bird which longs to doff its feathers and soar out towards a land of perpetual joy, where life is all sunshine and love all song. He had been made aware of his wife's complete detachment from himself more acutely than ever to-night. She was sombrelly absorbed. Once he heard her sigh heavily. After Lamballe had quitted their loge and the play had unfolded, he had seen her lose interest minute by minute in the contemplation of some problem of which he could not guess, and would not ask the meaning.

"A very forcible drama," vouchsafed the Ambassador, leaning across Mrs. Markoe and pulling up the window.

"Thank you," she said, with a shiver. "Yes," in answer to his remark. "Probing does always seem so unnecessary, though, to me." Her tone was fraught with undisguised melancholy.

The Ambassador mentally registered a sense of defeat. He threw off the depression the thought brought with it, and abruptly changed the subject.

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"Why, Carembourg?" inquired Mrs. Markoe again, in a slightly agitated voice, some minutes later. They were ensconced in the library, before a window looking out onto a garden which harbored two nightingales that were chanting loudly their wedding hymn.

The Ambassador was dissecting a bird with infinite relish.

The bones were audibly crunched between his strong, white teeth before he responded. When he did so his eyes fell upon the drooping face across the table. Mrs. Markoe was listlessly rolling some bread-crumbs into a little ball under her restless fingers. She was not hungry, she had said.

"Curiously enough," began the Ambassador, distinctly, "Burgess came in from Carembourg this morning to announce to me that Conway was missing."

There was a dull pause.

Then Mrs. Markoe raised her heavy lids and looked across the table at her husband.

"Where?" she asked.

The question was not strictly grammatical, but the halting word seemed the only one at hand just then.

"Ah," replied the Ambassador, "where, indeed? It seems——" Mrs. Markoe rose quietly and leaned half across the table to arrange a drooping rose in a low vase,—the bruises under her eyes seemed deepening minute by minute; the curves of her exquisite lips were compressed, her hand trembled: of this she appeared unconscious. Very softly she lifted the heavy rose and steadied it against a neighboring piece of fern. Then she stood silently, listening.

"Burgess said," continued Markoe, lighting a cigar and beginning to puff at it contentedly, "that, night before last Conway went forth in the driving rain to hunt up some details about that chalk strata. He did not return."

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"Since which?"

Was that his wife's voice?

Markoe wheeled abruptly and gazed in the direction from which the sound had come. The graceful figure had crossed the room as he spoke. It now stood behind him. One dimpled elbow was against the mantel. She was in shadow. Her outline was motionless.

"There has been no 'which,' " Markoe said, succinctly. "It's all *where*. Burgess had scoured the country without success. I ordered him back to Carembourg this morning to await my orders. I have heard nothing from him since. There is a screw loose somewhere."

"What do you fear?" inquired the strained voice.

"French law as to poachers is admittedly stiff. Conway should have performed his duties by daylight. He chose, out of the exuberance of his characteristic recklessness, to disobey orders. I suppose he can't expect to escape the consequences."

"Consequences!"

Again the Ambassador turned and looked silently towards the figure behind him. "He may have been arrested," he continued, shortly, "and he may have been——"

"Well?" breathlessly. The word was almost a cry.

"Shot," concluded the Ambassador. He knocked the ashes off the end of his cigar with his right hand little finger.

"What time was it when he disappeared?" inquired an extremely low, inanimate voice, after some seconds had elapsed.

"A little after six o'clock," vouchsafed Markoe, deliberately, subsequent to consulting his memory.

"Six o'clock night before last?"

"Precisely."

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"And there has been nothing done since?" with enforced calm.

Markoe wheeled about in his chair again, rose, and walked towards his wife.

"What was there to be done?" he demanded, pleasantly.

"You could have instituted a search. If he left Burgess at six o'clock night before last he has been gone already two days and two nights,—altogether about forty-eight hours. Time enough," bitterly, "it seems to an ignorant person like me, to have made some effort to discover his whereabouts."

The Ambassador smiled slowly. He looked out from under a pair of quizzical eyebrows at the figure before him. Mrs. Markoe was apparently greatly alarmed. She, too, undisguisedly lamented her husband's lack of perturbation.

"There is in all probability no cause for fear," he said, in that strong, vibrant voice of his which commanded courage and common sense. "He is old enough and clever enough to handle himself, the young rascal. He is losing time, that is all."

"If there is no cause for fear, why do you go to Carembourg?"

"Lamballe may be ugly," vouchsafed Markoe, lighting his second cigar with punctilious care.

"The reason why to-night you treated him with such marked courtesy?"

Mrs. Markoe was regarding her husband with a pair of contemptuous eyes.

"The reason why I did not display my hand," Markoe returned, slowly, after an irritating pause.

"You are diplomatic!"

"Say, rather, something of a strategist," murmured Markoe, deprecatingly.

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"As you will," abruptly. "And what do you propose to do now?"

"Wait."

"I beseech you, Stephen, do not fail to discover Jack Conway's whereabouts, and at once." Mrs. Markoe was standing in the middle of the room. She had walked there restlessly. She now looked over her shoulder at her stolid husband almost prayerfully.

"Are you not unduly nervous?"

"You have said yourself there is no time to be lost."

"Yes," he responded, unflinchingly, gazing at his adviser with a close, inscrutable intent.

She walked very wearily to a sofa on which she had thrown her cloak. It seemed to Markoe that her step was a little uneven. She lifted the light crumpled mass of lace and satin up to the level of her elbow and threw it across her arm with an effort. Then she glanced towards the door. The distance seemed far off. How tired she was! How deadly sodden with fatigue and apprehension!

She moved aimlessly across the floor. Then, softly, as a leaf falls from a frost-bitten tree, she stumbled a little forward and slid to the floor.

The Ambassador stepped out hurriedly, after flinging his cigar away. He knelt and lifted his wife's head to his knee. He placed one hand against her heart. It was beating unevenly. He drew a flask from his pocket, unscrewed the silver stopper with his teeth, and forced some drops between her ashen lips.

After a time the eyelids fell apart, and Mrs. Markoe saw her husband's imperturbable face looking into hers.

"I think I fainted," she whispered.

"Yes," confirmed the Ambassador, unsuggestively.

With his assistance she managed to rise to her feet.

"Shall I ring?" inquired Markoe.

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"Thank you. It is not necessary."

She moved towards the door slowly. Her husband watched her narrowly between the gleaming slit of his half-closed eyes. Suddenly she arrested her steps. She appeared to be gathering all her forces together for her forthcoming remark. When it came its import was not a surprise to the Ambassador.

"I hope you will lose no time," she said. Her eyes now looked across the space between them supplicatingly.

"Rest assured," he returned, helpfully, "that everything feasible will be done."

She interrupted him. "I think we should consider," feverishly, "that he is his mother's only child : in that case we—you and I—are, in a measure, responsible for his well-being."

"Obviously," returned the Ambassador, dryly. He stood tranquilly, one hand in each trousers-pocket, his head thrust out a little, listening with curious intentness to the sound of his wife's voice. It seemed charged with a new, weird low note to him. The cry of a wood-thrush in the dark.

She did not observe his attitude. She was too occupied, apparently, with the business in hand.

"He is very reckless," she said, wistfully. "Only a child after all. All men are grown-up children ; but I think Jack Conway is more of a child than any man I ever knew." She stopped. Her breath seemed gone.

"Precisely my own opinion," replied Markoe, very gently and kindly.

Mrs. Markoe became suddenly aware of the patience expressed in his attitude. She flushed visibly all over her exquisite face. She hesitated.

"I think, Stephen," she whispered,—the words leaped across the silent room from her to him,—"that I should like it were you to kiss me good-night."

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Markoe stiffened.

His hands came out of his trousers-pockets with a jerk. For one instant he stood strangely still, as though concentrating into that short period the strongest effort of his life.

"You are weak and ill," he said. Then, as she did not answer, but just stood and looked at him blindly, her lips half parted, one little hand moving up and down the moulding of the doorway against which she stood, he added, "I will not take advantage of so generous an offer in your present exhausted condition, my wife."

That was all.

To Markoe's surprise the words did not appear to hurt, or even ruffle her equanimity in the least. She only stood looking at him wistfully, deprecatingly, like a wilful child who has done wrong, knows it, and acknowledges a just punishment.

"I have been very foolish and weak," she said.

"You have been overdoing," he subjoined, still kindly. It was his habit ever to help her away from any evidence of pettishness by his complete understanding when she was ill or, in any way, suffering.

The subtle comprehension seemed perilously sweet to her to-night when she was so completely undone. She must sleep, she was thinking, and find strength somehow to do her part to-morrow.

"Good-night," she whispered, softly. It sounded soft. It was overwrought. She knew that her breath seemed gone, with the fibre which had dropped out of her being because of Markoe's mention of Conway's mysterious absence. Oh, what had she done! What had she done?

"Sweet dreams, my wife," said he.

She waved her hand. She disappeared.

Markoe went back to the mantel, and, lifting the lid of a

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match-box, lighted a fresh cigar which he drew from his vest-pocket. He stood reflectively, his legs wide apart, for a full half-hour, puffing slowly. Once, during a period in which his face darkened ominously, he looked across the room at the rose she had propped against the fern beside it with a curious light in his eyes.

“ ‘A rose by any other name,’ ” he said, aloud.

But his expression softened as he settled down to his familiar habit of endurance. Just before the dawn broke he extinguished the light and passed across the hall to his own room.

As he stepped over the threshold upon which his wife had stood so supplicatingly thirty minutes before, he raised his left arm awkwardly and, with a quick, strong motion,—supreme in the record it expressed of latent tenderness,—brushed his hand lingeringly along the panel against which her hand had lain. As he did so his face paled.

The next morning the Ambassador took the eight A.M. train for Carembourg. He left a message that he should be home for dinner that night.



CHAPTER XXIII

CONCERNING CAREMBOURG

THE ensuing afternoon Mrs. Conway's salons were crowded. A gifted actress from Milan was voicing the synopsis of a drama to come off the following fall at one of the theatres on the boulevards. She was a fagged-looking woman with tragic eyes and a divine smile. She was to be amply remunerated for making that pampered company, which was listening to her passionate delivery with interest, experience genuine emotion.

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The modern fashionable community professes the most desirable sensation alive to be contained in a song, or a speech which makes the cold shivers run up and down one's spine. In this particular the famous Italian actress more than filled the bill.

When the Ambassadors came in, and the commotion coincident with the universal recognition of her arrival had subsided, the Italian was made aware of another feather in her cap. She glanced shyly in Mrs. Markoe's direction. She saw a statuesque face with heavy, inscrutable eyes, the purest mouth she ever remembered to have witnessed, and a figure which for graceful distinction was unique. She registered a mental vow to address the remainder of her performance to this figure, which was clad in a sumptuous violet creation that seemed to her toil-hardened, if still imaginative, spirit to be composed of chastened angel's wings.

But as she continued her monotone she discovered to her chagrin that the new-comer's spirit was neither with her own speech nor her own personality. Rather, the limpid orbs were fixed—a firm determination in their direct gaze—upon a man in the corner who seemed to be the god of that golden afternoon's discourse.

He was very tall, with a perfect manner, and an ease which betokened race,—the Italian was reciting magnificently while making this observation,—accompanied by an air of having attained his present distinction by right.

She saw the Ambassador rise, as though impelled by an unseen force, and advance towards this man. She saw her lay one gloved hand against his arm impressively. She saw the man who, a few minutes afterwards, Mrs. Conway, upon the tragedian's inquiry, informed her was the most prominent figure in the Paris world, because of a play that he had recently produced at the Français, which

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was registering a colossal success, turn and answer the question which had been put to him. She saw him stroll away with the Ambassadors out onto a terrace at the back, where a few members of her audience, unable to hear her, had seated themselves unwillingly.

She wondered.

Then she realized she was but a spoke in the social wheel, whereas the Ambassadors occupied the enviable position of the hub. And she contemplated the old comedy of position versus ability with mild amusement.

"Do I know Carembourg?" Lamballe reiterated, after he had acknowledged the Ambassadors's approach by an inclination, and one of his comprehensive looks which included a recognition and an admiring acknowledgment of toilet and person. "It is my home."

"I thought Paris was that?"

He smiled no. "Say, rather, my battle-field," he suggested, humorously. "Carembourg is the feudal castle where my forefathers registered their vows to their king. It is the nest of my ambitions as much. There I sort out my ideas. There I dream my dreams. There—what do I not do at Carembourg? Eat, sleep, and be merry? Not so; I am a child there once more, with a possession in all the kingdoms of the earth: with my early hope of heaven. It is my storehouse, full of the *débris* accumulated from contact with mankind. I arrange my confusions, and deliberate a process of neatness and precision subsequent upon the past winter's rush and go. Dear Carembourg! I go there to-morrow, chère madame." The end of his speech was strikingly abrupt. It was accompanied by a sigh of relief.

"To-morrow!" Mrs. Markoe was gazing at him with apparent consternation.

He took note of it, but appeared not to.

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"My play is launched," he affirmed, modestly. "It is high time I withdrew to gather substance for a new one."

"At Carembourg?"

"At Carembourg."

Then he glanced sharply at the shadowed face drooping before him, and questioned in his turn, perfunctorily.

"You know Carembourg?"

"I know of it."

"How so? Oh, to be sure," as she hesitated. It is the contested point, he thought. He presumed she knew of that. He refrained, upon this supposition, to continue his eulogy. But she, with a marked desertion of her ordinary tact, insisted.

"Is it a pretty country? Are there game preserves? Are your acres extensive?"

"All three," he answered, gayly.

"And you have owned the place for centuries?"

"My forefathers and I, for centuries."

"You have never wished to dispose of it?"

"For what purpose? In whose name? We do not buy and sell our homes, *chère madame*, as you do in that country of yours, which shifts so lamentably."

"I should like to see Carembourg," announced Mrs. Markoe, impulsively.

Lamballe bowed.

"Madame has but to name the day," said he. "My château is at her disposal."

Then Mrs. Conway moved towards them with the guest who had lent her talent to the afternoon's success, and who had requested an introduction to the dramatist, Ferdinand Lamballe.

"He was just asking me," remarked Mrs. Markoe, in a very low voice, "if I wouldn't come to Carembourg."

"How delightful!" ejaculated Mrs. Conway. Her fair

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face pinkened like a pearl rose-tinted. The color receded slowly.

"Why not form a party and spend some days with me, dear friends, en villégiature?" cried Lamballe, enthusiastically.

"But the Ambassador?" protested Mrs. Markoe, doubtfully.

"If Monsieur Markoe will but consent to accept my hospitality," said Lamballe, with emphasis, "I will extend it to him indefinitely."

There was a slight pause.

Events seemed to them all to be tumbling head over heels.

"Sunday a week," urged Lamballe, "dependent upon the engagements of Monsieur l'Ambassadeur."

"I think that we will leave the invitation an open question, dependent upon circumstances," suggested Mrs. Markoe, with her customary air of polite self-detachment.

Then she exchanged a few words with Mrs. Conway and bade Lamballe "au revoir."

She passed a little cluster of chattering women on her way down the room. They had surrounded the Duchesse de Launoy, and were attacking her from all sides upon the subject of her famous ball. The Ambadress arrested her steps on the outskirts, highly elated for a second. She laid the flattering unction to her soul that no one had imagined her participation in the famous intrigue. She felt securely convinced that her discovery of the second harlequin's identity was a secret which she would carry with her to the grave.

But she was startled by the words which fell upon her ear.

"The first one was mercurial enough," cried a young person in a rose-colored frock which had wrought great havoc at the Grand Prix. "When he bounded into view,

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about midnight, my heart stood still. I was standing with father at the foot of the staircase. When Mariotti made his appearance we both shouted with delight. Only the night before at my birthday fête I had seen him turn somersaults from the fifth to the first gallery of his little play-house with the killingest sang-froid, my dear," turning towards a sympathetic listener ; "but when he disappeared, after clambering up that pillar like a winged wild-cat, the impetus of the night died out for me. It all seemed dull, stale, unprofitable. Then you," turning to the Duchesse, who was listening to her chatter with amused eyes,—“you had contracted for the whole pantomime, rang up the curtain for the second act.”

“I?” protested the Duchesse. “But I assure you I had nothing whatsoever to do with it. It was all Mariotti or all Monsieur Lamballe. I shall never be quite able to determine which.”

“Who was the third harlequin, then?” inquired the young woman in the pink frock.

“Yes, that is the question,” they all buzzed. “Harlequin, harlequin, catch the harlequin. Who was the third harlequin?”

“The one who glided out of that corridor like a ghost and confronted the second Mariotti on the staircase?”

“It must have been Mariotti himself,” suggested the Duchesse.

“Impossible. He was not lively enough, in the first place——”

“Nor mischievous at all, in the second.”

“Besides, he slipped away when the effect had been made. I saw him with my own eyes glide down a corridor with the prettiest Folly alive,—a mask in rainbow colors, with a three-cornered cap all rhine stones and bells, and the tiniest feet and twinkling ankles.”

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"If I were a matron instead of one of those miserable beings inured to perpetual chaperonage," protested the rose-colored young person, "I would privately interview Mariotti myself in person and discover the identity of his second double."

"How would you find him?"

"I would address myself to his play-house, my dear, and serenely demand an interview. Nothing dared, nothing have."

Mrs. Markoe moved away, thoughtfully.

On her way out she was assailed by her friends. Was she to be at the English Embassy ball that night? Had she seen the new American painter's chef-d'œuvre at the Salon since the alterations had been made at the suggestion of the French society of artists? Didn't she think the political imbroglio at the Chamber disgraceful in a civilized nation?

When she stepped into her brougham, she ordered the footman to turn the horses' heads cityward, instead of, as was her every-day custom, in the direction of the Bois.

She gave an address in a low, tense voice.

Her brougham drew up a few moments later before a florist's in the Rue Royale.

"I shan't drive this afternoon," Mrs. Markoe announced to her coachman. "You may go home; I need exercise."

Then she turned and entered the flower-shop.

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CHAPTER XXIV

AN UNGUARDED PROCEEDING

SHE stepped out of it three minutes later, cautiously. She drew a relieved sigh when she had mastered the fact that her own carriage was just turning the corner. Quietly drawing a thick veil from her pocket, she tied it on hastily and hailed a cab. She ordered the cocher to drive her to the ticket office of a small theatre which she had heard of, but never frequented.

When she arrived there, she paid the cocher for the course and dismissed him, after having been informed by an urchin, whom she feed largely to obtain the desired information, that Monsieur Mariotti was "chez lui."

After watching the fiacre out of sight, she turned and climbed a flight of evil-smelling stairs to the left of a tobacco-shop, where two or three cochers in the buff cloth coats and white rubber hats of the Urbaine livery were noisily disputing over a bottle of vin ordinaire and a game of picquet.

She knocked on a dingy door surmounted with the name Mariotti in letters three inches high, and gilded heavily. She entered upon the invitation of a coarse voice, which cried, "Entrez."

Mariotti was seated before a table with a pack of dirty cards before him. He was telling his fortune.

He sprang to his feet as the unexpected feminine figure made itself evident, and asked his visitor her business.

"The present interview," she began, in a muffled voice, "is to be considered strictly private."

Mariotti raised his heavy eyebrows. He loved intrigue

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the way a mouse loves cheese,—because its spice consisted mainly of the forbidden. He lifted himself on tiptoe and made his way cautiously towards the greasy door, against which he laid his ear.

Then he turned to his chair with his finger against his lips. His carpet slippers dragged out a weary accompaniment against the slop-stained floor.

Mrs. Markoe shuddered mentally.

She took out her purse and extracted fifty francs from it. She laid the money on the table and pushed it towards Mariotti silently.

She said clearly, "I have a few questions to ask of you. I will require the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

Mariotti nodded.

"Night before last," she began distinctly, her voice shaking a little, "the Duchesse de Launoy gave a ball; there were three Mariottis there, I have been informed. My paramount question is, which Mariotti were you?"

Mariotti grinned; then he shuffled his heels against the rungs of his chair and answered, fingering the fifty-franc bill indifferently as he did so,—

"I go in first. It is about twelve o'clock. Lamballe is not arrive. He is not to come until I leave. That is the agreement. The idea is that he be taken for Mariotti after I enter and make myself known. His representation falls flat. He might have know it would," in the regretful tone of a specialist who has witnessed a great opportunity lost. "Besides the difference in our ages, my illustrious patron, he is unfit to compete with me." He slapped himself on his chest, which had inflated like the breast of an extremely ill-groomed peacock.

"Yes, yes. But how about the third Mariotti?"

Mariotti flashed a hurt glance in the direction of his in-

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terlocutor. It was evident he considered her question as oblique as its subject-matter.

"Of the third Mariotti," pronounced he, magnificently, with a flourish of contempt, one dirty finger laid against his nose with an expression of cunning, "I concern not myself. He encounters me at night. He strips me of my costume ; of my honor. He offends my illustrious patron. Monsieur Lamballe has not been of late to witness my performance. Since the affair at the Duchesse's they are attended by the élite. But Lamballe, he not vouchsafe a word. A sure sign he is displeased."

Mrs. Markoe frowned restlessly.

"You sold your costume to the third harlequin," she persisted then, "after you had made yourself known at the Duchesse's ; before Monsieur Lamballe put in an appearance?"

"Exactly so."

"What became of the third Mariotti?" inquired Mrs. Markoe, with emphasis.

She awaited Mariotti's reply with palpitating anxiety.

He accorded it wordlessly by lifting his shoulders to the lobes of his ears, raising his eyebrows to the roots of his hair, pursing out his lips with a quizzical grimace, and extending his hands, their palms upward.

"You mean you do not know?"

"I do not know."

There was a pause.

"You can make no surmise?"

"How is that possible? The third Mariotti encounter me in the Duchesse's garden just as I was about to make my exit. He whisper in my ear that he is a friend. Base subterfuge ! He lure me to a kiosque at the corner of the Champs-Élysées. He demand the costume I wear for a mere pittance. Pour rien ! Saperlotte, say I, I have a

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better one at home. Why not give the pauvre diable a chance to amuse himself? Then I think he has no right to my thunder. I demur. He insist. The exchange is made. For a song," regretfully, and with the air of a generous soul which had been overreached.

"Where did he leave you?" The tone was weak, spent, hopeless.

"He dragged me with him to the back room of a house where my friend, the director of the Fricandean, lives," mentioning the name of a famous café chantant; "there he divest himself of his superfluous garments, attire himself in mine; make away. I protest. I cry. I implore—in vain. He is a low dog with some mauvaise intention against Lamballe in his veins. I become afterwards sure. Of that fear I feel my veins congealing. But as the thought strike me—he is off."

"Then?" The voice was strident, harassed, ungoverned.

"That is all," finished Mariotti, with a grimace.

"But he must have returned if, as you say, he left his clothes in the room to which you conducted him, to alter his costume."

Mariotti was silent. With a fine smile he was curling the fifty-franc note about his forefinger.

Mrs. Markoe drew her jewelled purse from her pocket—a gold-linked one with a monogram of rubies set in the top—and extracted another fifty francs.

"You would be wise," she said, softly, "to tell me the whole of your experience in this transaction. I can promise you, you will lose nothing in the operation."

Mariotti mellowed visibly.

He leaned forward, and, folding the new note carefully against the old one, he slid the two slowly into his vest-pocket.

"*As far as I know,*" said he, "he did not return."

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"And his clothes?"

"There are no clothes in the house of which I speak which at all answer to his clothes description. Either he made off in the ones he borrow of me, or he return, after my departure, for his own. I swear to you, kind lady, that even address you yourself to the place I mention, you find—rien!"

Mrs. Markoe rose.

"Have you any idea," she inquired, as she moved towards the door, "of the third Mariotti's identity?"

"Aucune."

"I thank you."

She prepared to open the door and step across the threshold, when the Gascon crept up close to her and whispered softly, "He was tall; his voice was a foreign voice. He laugh at me. He steal my clothes. I hate him!"

Mrs. Markoe recoiled. For some mysterious reason her heart beat uncontrollably. The black snaky eyes of the trapèze performer were thrust wickedly towards her veiled face. Some words hissed forth, a mortal defiance underlying them.

"Let me pass," she commanded, peremptorily.

Mariotti stepped back, muttering between his dark broken teeth. She opened the door with a spasmodic effort. She descended the stairs, expecting every moment to hear Mariotti's light footfall behind her. But in this she was happily disappointed.

The neighborhood was a filthy one. The little play-house's façade shone out meretriciously between the frame work of dingy buildings which stood in rows each side of it.

Mrs. Markoe hailed a cab, and stepping into it, drove within half a block of her own home. She alighted, paid the cocher for the course, divested herself of her veil, and

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as she entered her hallway asked the footman if the Ambassador had returned.

"Monsieur l'Ambassadeur had been chez lui just five minutes," she was assured.

Mrs. Markoe slowly made her way towards the library.

After his visitor had turned the corner of that dingy street in which was the play-house, which drew a vaster crowd than any dwelling of its size in the district, Mariotti slid from an alley-way near by and, flinging himself into a passing fiacre, followed her. He waited until her carriage stopped in the Avenue Marceau, slid to the ground, and silently insinuated himself between her and the gutter until she had entered the courtyard of the private hotel over which swung the tricolored emblem of the United States. Then, as she disappeared, he regarded the house stealthily. He withdrew from his dingy pocket a dirty piece of crumpled paper and, with a stubby pencil, printed on it clearly 61 Avenue Marceau. Then, cramming it into his pocket, he carelessly darted on his way past the fiacre which was waiting for him into a neighboring chemist's, where he bought a stick of licorice for a sou while putting some questions in regard to the occupants of the surrounding houses, called at the tobacconist's to request a light, and walked boldly into the grocer's on the corner to buy a candle. While consummating his purchase he demanded inquisitively the ostensible income of the United States Ambassador.

The grocer, a garrulous person, who got more entertainment out of his exorbitance than his clients ever obtained by purchasing his over-priced goods, whispered a fortuitous number with the air of a trustworthy personage who absorbs billions as his customary mental diet.

Mariotti made off as though the information he had received was of small importance.

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Arrived at the corner of the street he handed his driver a franc, and receiving in exchange a curse, shrugged his shoulders, carefully stuffed his candle and licorice in his pocket, and, to the cocher's consternation, flung his heels into the air, and walked serenely on the palms of his hands across the roadway with its myriad carts, bicycles, tramways, and motor cars, until he reached the bridge which spanned the Seine. Then as a small urchin recognized him in frantic glee and began shouting his name, Mariotti placed his finger to the side of his nose with a warning gesture, turned a somersault with a gliding motion, and disappeared over the bridge's parapet, going head downward !

There was a shout of trepidation from the bustling throng, which had begun to gather as the fantastic figure made its fanciful way across the street.

As Mariotti's body swung over the parapet the crowd rushed forward to look over onto what they supposed might be his stark and quivering body lying against the stones many feet beneath.

Instead their anxious gaze fell on a lithe elastic body, its hands plunged deep in its pockets, swinging nonchalantly along the lower quai.



CHAPTER XXV

A DISCLOSURE

MRS. MARKOE did not wait to knock. She opened the door softly and looked in. She saw her husband's figure standing before the window with its back towards her. She swung the door wider, stepped across the threshold, and closed it behind her.

The Ambassador turned.

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He saw her standing, where she had stood last night supplicatingly, this afternoon attired superbly in a violet creation which set off her beauty to rare advantage and emphasized her expression of self-control. The conviction which had been with him all day that her nature was softening, that he might hope some day for a complete cessation of hostilities at least, vanished. He saw the familiar, weary problem of defiance strong as ever in its attitude of independence. He did not know his wife had assumed it, in more forcible evidence than ever now, to conceal a horrible feeling of abject apprehension.

"Have you any news?" she asked.

"None," he returned, shortly. He turned towards the window again. She persistently came round between him and the view it commanded, and looked straight up into his face. His was tired and worn. The day had been an anxious one. He felt checkmated ; he had not yet considered his next move.

"What course did you pursue?"

"The only one : I interviewed the innkeeper in vain. I saw the ticket-master at the station. He might have aided us, for, though I do not believe Conway could have deserted his post, still there is the possible chance that he might have taken the wrong route, and been run across by some one either approaching or leaving the station."

She was listening with drooping lids. As he had returned her vivid gaze her own serenity had broken up and shifted. Markoe registered her self-consciousness with scant attentiveness. He had just cause to remember it later.

"The innkeeper slept too soundly, it seems, that night. The station-master felt ill, and transferred his duties to the care of a friend who does not remember that anybody passed through the station to the train. All he has recollected thus far is the fact of the storm. That, he said,

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completely dazed him. Burgess fancies there has been foul play. I think, perhaps his surmise may be correct."

"What will you do?"

"Employ a detective. He will root the matter out in no time."

Mrs. Markoe drew a short, audible breath.

"Does his mother know?" she asked.

Markoe frowned. "I cannot see," he ejaculated, "why she should know. It would cause her profound uneasiness. If the young fellow turns up, which he will very shortly, let us hope, it will be time enough to inform his mother of it."

"I think she should be told at once."

"As you will," coincided Markoe.

Mrs. Markoe hesitated. "Will you tell her?" she pleaded, timidly.

"I think you may assume that responsibility," returned the Ambassador, dryly.

His wife flushed painfully. A frightened look came into her eyes. Then they filled with tears.

"As you will," she complied.

Five hours later Markoe was closeted with the chief of the Paris detective force, and two days subsequent to that interview Lubin returned from Carembourg, and was immediately admitted to the Ambassador's presence.

"It's a curious affair all round," vouchsafed this interesting visitor. He was a short, squarely-built personage with a cunning expression, and hair chopped off short in front and sides, and left comparatively long in the back,—a hirsute adornment which gave him the air of a sanctimonious prelate behind and the profile of an irreverent urchin. "I have made one step in a direction which balks me considerably. It is my impression that Monsieur Conway came up to Paris the 10th of June, after leaving the inn in ostensible search for the dividing line and the chalk-banks."

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“Why so?”

“The ticket agent’s friend has remembered at last, after an exhausting cross-examination, that a man did come into the station. He bought a ticket for Paris the evening of the 10th of June. He was muffled to the chin. His account of the traveller’s costume tallies precisely with your surveyor’s description of the one in which Monsieur Conway was attired when he set forth. A slouch hat pulled well over the eyes, a muffler covering the chin, a pair of high boots splashed with mud, and a bag slung across one shoulder. Not the attire of a gentleman, perhaps, but at least a disguise. The man bought a ticket for Paris,” concluded the detective.

“For Paris! But that fact alone should declare your discovery to be a worthless one. Conway had but just left Paris two days before. There was nothing to call him back until his mission was accomplished. He is not a bungler. He is a clean-cut young fellow, enthusiastically anxious to prove himself of value. The supposition must be incorrect. There were probably a number of persons who took the evening train for Paris the 10th of June.”

“Pardon me. There was but one.”

“You are sure?”

“The ticket agent’s register confirms this. So does the conductor. There was but one ticket for Paris sold and taken up the night of the 10th. A ticket to which was attached a return.”

“A return?” incredulously.

“Monsieur seems astonished. What more natural than that Monsieur Conway should have desired to confirm his own possible winnings in regard to the Grand Prix! He could have come up to Paris by night and returned to Carembourg the next morning.”

“Natural, perhaps, but not probable. I know Conway, I

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tell you. He was spoiling for immediate action when he left here. I would stake my oath that he is not the man to desert his post."

The detective lifted his eyebrows sceptically. "Men are not always responsible for their actions. If they were so, our profession would suffer. There might have been some cause which monsieur has not taken into consideration."

The Ambassador changed his position uncomfortably. The idea had flashed across his own mind. He dismissed it peremptorily.

"There is but one thing to be done," he stated, shortly. "You must work up your side of the case from the railway-station ticket into Paris and back again, if necessary. I will, if it is imperative, consult Lamballe."

The latter phrase was uttered regretfully. Markoe was desirous of putting the entire detective force at work before disclosing his need to his antagonist. But he recognized in case of imperious need one must employ a desperate remedy: that to obtain adequate influence he must reveal his own hand. Perhaps it might induce Lamballe to do likewise. In this matter the eminent Parisian had it in his power to be supreme.

The Ambassadors never felt so much like an administrator of incarnate cruelty as she did that golden afternoon four weeks later when she unsettled her friend's calm by inserting the wedge of the same hideous doubt which was so bitterly assailing her own soul. Mrs. Conway's face was such a serene face. It carried its own story; it commanded forbearance; it seemed to have reached the end of endurance: such a beautiful, intrinsically patient face with the wide, gentle brows, and the level eyes, and the proud lips. How could she break up that calm to put in its place warring anguish, Kate Markoe asked herself, with a rebellious

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ache clamoring within her not to reveal the truth when peace and security might even now, through some unexpected stroke of destiny, be weaving into place once more.

They were driving round the lake in the Bois, with its miniature boats and its artificial touches of trained nature. They passed the great barouche of the English Ambassador, who saluted the two stately women impressively. They saw Condorcet in a high English cart with the Princesse. Later they met Lamballe in his own victoria, chatting earnestly with a careworn-looking man who was seated beside him.

"Tell me about Jack," Kate Markoe said, swallowing something in her throat with an effort, leaning forward, and pressing her gloved hand against Mrs. Conway's, which lay on the carriage seat between them.

Jack's mother smiled proudly.

"It's time he was back, isn't it?" she asked, wistfully. "Let him tell you himself of the day he rescued that old fisherman from drowning at Newport when he was only twelve years old."

"He never told me that!" cried the Ambassadors.

"Of the day I found him, in speech a silver-tongued baby orator, lecturing a beggar lad who had bullied a cruel boy."

"Of course, he never told me that either," said Mrs. Markoe.

"No," returned his mother. "Jack only tells the needless parts; the useless rôle he plays in life; the singularity of a destiny which seems all fulfilled. You know. We have so many of that class in our country, Kate. It requires considerable self-abnegation for a boy or girl brought up in luxury to first establish their altars and their fires, and then fight for them. Character is a world within a world. There is the character we are born with and the character circumstance makes; but say there are no craggy circumstances, figuratively speaking; say one's way

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is so softened that fibre deteriorates instead of strengthening with use and abuse. It seems to me, up to the present, that has been Jack's case. I glory in the fact that he has fretted against it. I hope this present exigency will bring forth all his energy, all his will-power, and will create a fury of protest within him that will bear upon his whole future life."

She was speaking dreamily. Thinking aloud. Why not? She and Kate Markoe had established the sweetest mutual understanding between them. If the Ambassadors had been the one to set the mother's fancy rolling in the direction of her boy since his absence, Mrs. Conway, when she considered the matter, concluded gratefully that the gentle hint was only an evidence of her friend's tact to lead her into beloved rather than distasteful by-paths. She went on,—

"I wish the Carembourg matter would ripen," she said. "I wonder how it has gone with him. Will I ever establish callousness in this maternal heart of mine? Ah, me! How weak we women are, and how much more than loving! My heart throbs with as much anxiety when Jack is far from me as in those days when they took him from my arms as a baby, if only to give him back cooing and rosy from his bath."

"I have something to say to you," began Kate Markoe in a broken voice.

Mrs. Conway concurred comfortably. She turned towards her friend,—to remember long afterwards how very white her face had seemed; but then, it never had much color in it. The skin was so ravishingly fair and transparent. "I thought so," she returned, gently. "There is something on your mind. It seems to me I have almost seen you grow thinner perceptibly within the past few days. What is it?"

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"Late hours, possibly. I have been overdoing; but that is not——"

"Some gnawing worry," suggested Mrs. Conway, helpfully. "Some little womanly ailment. Out with it, dear heart. An illusion nonplussed? Then more's the pity. Ah! we women with our great steadfast ideals, and our consciousness of how very far indeed from sweetness the thing is in reality. Come. Stephen has not responded to your latest whim? Jack is not here to spoil you. He spoils us all."

"I wonder," whispered Kate Markoe, growing still paler, "why he does not return?"

It was weeks later. She had hoped the lapse of time might have opened Mrs. Conway's eyes. But she had seemed oddly trustful. This was the first time Mrs. Markoe had dared mouth the awful apprehension which was making of her a thing of ice and anguish with frozen blood and melting flesh.

Mrs. Conway lifted her sunshade to ward off the rays of the burning July sun. The carriage turned into a narrow by-path away from the congested Avenue des Acacias.

"I am horribly anxious," whispered the weighted voice beside her.

Mrs. Conway started. "But Stephen knows his whereabouts."

"Stephen does *not*."

"You mean—what a precious sympathetic creature you are, Kate!"

"Yes," answered Kate, dully.

"Aren't you worrying yourself unduly? To be sure, the matter was to have been consummated in two days, and that is long ago, but Stephen has always put me off when I spoke of it, and told me Jack had a way of doing things which would not brook interference."

"He has, indeed."

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"And it has been four weeks."

"Four weeks and five days."

There was a note in the constrained voice which suddenly broke Mrs. Conway's serenity straight across. She looked right at her companion; at the eyes with the bruised lines underneath them, which she had remarked and puzzled over for days; at the hand busy fastening a stray lock of hair which the wind had loosened. Was the gesture meant to hide the delicate pallor of the face which now she began to scrutinize piercingly; a protest welling up in her which was formidably cruel, tearing her pace in shreds, upsetting her hardly acquired patience?

Had she been blind, deaf, and dumb?

"Is there cause for anxiety, Kate?"

Mrs. Markoe let her hand fall, and looked back into her friend's face pitifully. She felt like the assassin of mother and son.

"I have been very anxious," she said, brokenly, "for four weeks and three days. Stephen has counselled patience. Patience!" with a choked cry. "But I—something has told me that the thing is not as it should be. It was so simple, I tell you." She seemed pleading against some violent consciousness which was striving to burst through her speech. She forced the confession down with an iron hand as she had done before. "He left Burgess, it seems, the night before they were to return with their report; left him in a storm; set forth in search of some dividing line."

"That is just like my Jack," broke in the mother's fond, breathless voice.

"Oh, hush! He did not return; he never has returned."

"Since which?" Was that Mrs. Conway's voice. It was a hoarse whisper.

"There has been everything done. The detective force

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is hard at work. Stephen is conducting the affair step by step ; he is giving his personal attention to it. He does not sleep night or day."

"And?"

"There is no clue. We are at a loss——"

The wind lifted the lace on Mrs. Conway's parasol. She saw through it a landscape fraught with spring-time and hope,—or what seemed hope,—wherein a little lad with golden curls and a glowing face lit by a pair of Spanish eyes stood with his fists clinched, looking down on a broken toy at his feet. "But I will buy another soon, little laddie," she heard her own tender voice saying. He stamped his little foot. "Muzzers aren't sojers," he said, wickedly. "I want my sojer now. I has my muzzer every day. Jack's tired of muzzer. He wants sojer."

It had been the incipient cry of the masculine gender for space and action. And she had fretted that his way had not been a stormy one ; she had urged him to find an opportunity. She had bid him spurn a life of ease to create something worth while in its stead. Was this worth while? A futile mission : loss ; disaster ; nothingness.

"Oh, we poor women !" she cried.

It was the only moan she voiced aloud.

But her listener knew that the words contained an infinitude of woe. It meant that woman's portion now and forever is to wait patiently, prayerfully, and helplessly.

"We will go home," she said, quietly, to the footman.

When they drove up in front of her entresol in the Avenue d'Iéna she turned and looked back at the figure she had left in the carriage. Her eyes were full of tears. The door, stretched wide by an obsequious domestic, fell open. It disclosed the broad staircase bordered with pots of flowering plants. Some guns, their steel barrels glistening in the rays of the declining sun, hung in rows over a

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deer's head which young Conway had brought back some two years since as a trophy of his skill in the Rocky Mountains.

Mrs. Conway looked at the guns, and then at the deer's head, and then at the broad staircase.

"He used to run up those stairs two steps at a time," she said, brokenly.

Then she went in. The door fell to behind her.



CHAPTER XXVI

THE RISE OF MARIOTTI

DURING the month of August the little theatre, in the congested street to which the Ambassadors had paid her secret visit with its apparently fruitless errand some weeks before, became common talk. Those Parisians whom commerce, or poverty, or a sluggish inclination deterred from taking advantage of the heated period in which to go a-holidaying, discussed it with infinite delight.

Masons were set to work to demolish both the exterior and the interior of that dilapidated structure which had witnessed the struggles of a fifth-class genius whose methods of procedure, up to the present, had been as volatile as his representations. After a period in which the gaping crowd experienced the daily joy of witnessing the arrival of plaster and building material enough—it seemed to their uninitiated view—to have patched up the ruins of the Tuileries; of swallowing dust in choking clouds coincident with the tearing down of the old building and the putting up of the new; of advancing suppositions as to the sudden incomprehensible wealth which had enabled Mariotti to renew with such

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extravagance his frame for professional exhibitions, the fact of the clown's prosperity became an established act ; its development but a matter of time.

The interior was reported—after some days, during which the unimportant roadway it controlled had become but a thoroughfare to and from the boulevards—to being high on the way towards representing one of those cozy nests of warmth and illumination which combine amusement and comfort with art. There was no doubt it would, too, be popular.

The Théâtre Mariotti !

That was its name. The words blossomed forth in glaring gas-lit letters on a garish blue background. They were slung across the street on a wire, from the front of the play-house to the second-story window of an obliging cheese-monger, who was nothing loath to augment his clientèle by lending his interest, with a few hundred francs, which he was informed by Mariotti was a miserable price for such a big advertisement to the project.

The Théâtre Mariotti was to be the playground of all the jugglers, the trapèze performers, the music-hall singers, the travelling families who substituted their young from infancy as a means of obtaining livelihood by somersaulting through the era of baby elasticity up to adult proficiency, the trick specialists with their dogs and cats, the young ladies who warbled words to the accompaniment of a capital band attired in a Mariotti livery ; in sum, the variety specialists of the world.

But the bright particular star was to be Mariotti himself, in a rôle which, it was prophesied, would be kaleidoscopic.

He was known to be a fraudulent specimen of legitimate art ; but the majority of amusement-seekers were not looking for problems. They cried for sparkle, fun, wit ; something which lent color, not substance ; brightness, not analysis. At the Théâtre Mariotti—it was announced weeks

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before the opening night—this delightful state of things would be disclosed for digestion at an insignificant cost.

When that night came the little street was so gorged with fiacres that it took the grocer and his wife—who had been up the Seine for a jollification with a maiden aunt—an hour and a quarter to push their way from the boulevard to their own shop.

It was Sunday. What of human nature which had been gallivanting in the Bois all day, and down and up the river, and over in the Boule' Miche', at Charenton, and Poissy, and out at Auteuil, boiled over again, into the boulevards on its way home. Its sweetheart was on its arm, gabbling, insatiable, looking for the next thing to turn up.

On the boulevards, which were as light as day, thousands of tables were set out on the sidewalks, while hundreds of weary and perspiring waiters were flying through the congested lines of people, their napkins over their arms, administering bocks and ices. There was a cold moon looking down on the scene of bustle cynically. The bulbed fringes of light which danced in a soft summer breeze, the harbinger of a black thunder-storm which was rolling up in the west, bobbed wickedly in and out of the tree-branches, which were whispering busily to one another.

It seemed as if the elements themselves conspired in Mariotti's favor that night. For no sooner had the vast throng dined, its hum, like that of a huge bumblebee, buzzing along the boulevard to the Place de l'Opéra away up as far as the Porte St. Martin, than there came a clap of thunder which made the women shriek and the men start and run about for places of shelter.

There had been sandwich men all day parading the main thoroughfares. They carried placards hung from their shoulders front and back ; they were attired in varicolored liveries, harlequin-styled, in black, kaleidoscopi-

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cally striped, and pieced together. They wore fanciful, cone-shaped caps. They sang, as they made their way along, in a nasal monotone which pierced its way through the hum of voices and shuffling footsteps, of how young Harlequin had been a beggar lad once upon a time. He had longed to go with his fellows to a village dance on the green. Having no holiday clothes, he wept. His comrades, sorrowful, made up a plan in his favor. This plan was for each to give a small portion of his or her costume until Harlequin should secure enough to clothe himself. No sooner said than done. Harlequin went to the dance in a costume made up of pieces of every denomination and color and size and shape. But he broke all the maiden's hearts and roused the jealousy of the men, because he had as many moods as he looked. Ever afterwards man's moods had been as many-colored, as evanescent, as deep as the sea.

Thus the sandwich men chanted as they pushed their way through that rollicking throng all day long, until Harlequin had become an established fact which the boulevards consumed rapaciously ; a new plat for the loafer's distraction.

As the rain came rushing along, swishing right and left, the crowd followed the sandwich-harlequins en masse. When they found they led them into a narrow street, where the shelving roofs sheltered the crowds from the torrents of rain which fell in sheets, it seemed but a merciful Providence who guided the footsteps of that congested throng into a gay little play-house which gleamed like a harbor of light and love beckoning them in to forget the storm on their heels.

It turned out to be the veriest jewel of a play-house with the newest, if rankly meretricious, adornments. The loges were decorated in yellow. The lights were made to represent great bunches of golden wheat, with poppy bulbs

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softening the glare. And there was a drop-curtain portraying a green dog running alongside a pink river, the whole surrounded by purple mountains, which, for fidelity to nature, was unique !

That was a gala night. The theatre was warm ; outside the storm was raging fearfully. The theatre was light ; on the boulevards there was an odor of escaping gas caused by the wanton wind's too arduous fooling with the gas-jets. The theatre was full of good cheer. Mariotti's name, from the first to the last of the programme, was on every lip.

For in that night he outdid himself. He was scene-shifter, performer, audience, initiator, everything in one. There was nowhere he was not ; everywhere he was ; almost, it seemed, at one and the same time. He led the applause, and urged on the actors, and disclosed his own oddly versatile talent, and relegated his assistants to their most brilliant niche.

Towards the end, when the house had exhausted itself in cheering, laughing its sides sore, exchanging mutual glances of delight and appreciation, he was called for vociferously.

Mariotti came forward. The rogue understood playing modesty as well as how to command applause, to steal some one else's methods, to copy a good thing, and make out of it a comic interpretation.

He advanced, rubbing the palms of his hands together a little awkwardly, with a nervous apology of a cough and the wickedest gleam of mischief incarnate in his eye. He wore the harlequin costume. Already some critic, who had slipped in by chance, was imagining his own article for the next day's paper which would recount this remarkable clown's triumph in emphasizing his own mercurial entity through his habiliments, as changeable, as wilfully erratic as himself.

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"Kind friends," cried Mariotti, "I thank you for this night of encouragement. I had not thought to be so successful. I am but a humble well-wisher, who seeks to efface from your countenances everything but the lines of laughter. Let gayety be our watchword ; let joyousness be our strength. I have named my little play-house Mariotti's Théâtre ; but if you find it better to entitle it Laugh Hall, or Merriment Auditorium, or even Ecstasy Building, that right of yours shall be observed. I tear down my name, and put in its stead a vow to everlasting cheer !"

"No, no : we want Mariotti !" they all cried.

Then the clown glowed ; then the hands stopped rubbing themselves together nervously ; the snaky, bead-like eyes changed their shifting expression.

He drew up his supple, peculiarly serpentine figure, and advanced close to the footlights. With that gesture, for which he was known far and wide,—his finger alongside of his nose,—he spoke clearly through his broken teeth.

"You want Mariotti, mes enfants?" asked he. "Beware ! Know, then, there is more than one Mariotti. There are two, three, a thousand such. There is the Mariotti who leaps—like this." The fellow made a running jump across the stage, bounded on his hands from the footlights to a loge where a crowd of men and women were applauding him vociferously, and then, straightening himself with the languid air of a drawing-room devotee, walked back into place again. "There is the Mariotti who sings." The clown here broke into a wild tune which for audacious handling of measure was singularly captivating, "There is the Mariotti who loves ; the Mariotti who hates,"—the countenance was singularly vindictive,—“and the Mariotti who suffers.” The whole figure drooped helplessly ; a line of despair from the limp hands to the sodden heels. "And there is the Mariotti who hopes." The clown gathered

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himself together, and, with an expansive gesture, held forth both his arms. "Ah, mes amis ! I love my Paris and my Parisians."

The latter appeal brought down the house.

From that night Mariotti's name was caught up from the boulevards to the Arch, from the Bois to the Place de la Bourse,—oil poured on the flame of an oncoming inevitability.

He exercised all his cunning contriving new rôles, which he revealed nightly with increasing evidence of ingenuity. He was the idol of the small boy ; the great man of his quarter. The grocer talked of him with tears in his eyes, recounting how "simple" he was in his tastes and how "abundant" in his expenditures. Of this there was no doubt. Mariotti was living, in the quarter interpretation, like a live lord. His vegetables were cooked in oil and his meat with garlic. The newspapers recounted how the queen of a small island in the Pacific was dying of love for him. A discreet murmur was set agog in select circles, where Mariotti's name, since his escapade at the Duchesse's had been discussed with reverence, that a great lady had said to her confidante that for sparkle and softness and affection the famous clown's eyes reminded her of her pet poodle's that had died at the tender age of twenty-seven years. But concerning all these tales Mariotti protested himself a victim of circumstances. He claimed that the world little comprehended a humble individual who only sought to refrain from tears, to look upon the bright side of the present, to forget the hereafter ; that it was putting him upon a pedestal which he neither desired nor had anticipated ; that it named him a clown, while in reality he merely was living his sunny, ardent nature aloud.

If the charlatan overreached himself a trifle in the anomaly he betrayed of a simple soul who bought up critics while

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at one and the same time turning somersaults in their faces, of exhorting appreciation while deploring its quality, it is supposable that he did no less than others.

If his expenditures overreached his income, if his speeches remained unmatched by his acts, if his promises went unfulfilled and his cruelties were on a par with his voraciousness, these minor details might have been considered part and parcel of his versatility.

A wilier soul never lived, nor a more subtle, nor a less exalted.

His audience increased night by night and day by day, as, unable to compete with the multitude, he put on matinée performances. The tales circulated in his honor might almost have been said to be invented by Mariotti himself.

How the famous theatre was paid for, constructed, managed, was not a question which concerned any more conspicuous beings than a few starving masons who pleaded in vain for their earnings, and some indigent women who railed in the clown's face now and then with cries like the whinings of wounded animals. Mariotti, more and more fearfully, slunk to and from his play-house to a lodging near. Concerning this lodging the population had already made complaints to the police. Mysterious cries came through the walls to their ears, cries muffled and indistinct, but which, in spite of their inexplicable awfulness, continued.

The police enjoyed Mariotti's performances—they and their families—in seats provided for them, weekly, by the management. Being experienced men, as well as influential, they deplored the jealousy and venom of that portion of the quarter which sought to depreciate the clown's prosperity, and left his dwelling-place uninspected.

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CHAPTER XXVII

THE AMBASSADOR ENTERS THE ENEMY'S RANKS

LUBIN, after four weeks' exhaustive search, reported himself insuperably perplexed. He expressed a disgust for Conway's methods of procedure which he did not hesitate to exhibit. Either, he argued, the daring young fellow was playing them a game of hide-and-seek or he had been totally annihilated by some foreign force.

Mrs. Markoe and Mrs. Conway had taken a house together at Fontainebleau during the heated period. They were mutually striving to encourage one another in the long anguished days of suspense. The Ambassador spent the chief portion of his time in town attending to international affairs, while endeavoring to discover clues of which Lubin had proclaimed the mystery to be uniquely devoid.

Finally, as a last resource, Markoe made an appointment with Lamballe.

The dramatist wrote, in response to the Ambassador's politely worded note, that he would be pleased to receive the illustrious representative of United States interests at breakfast. Markoe, who disliked confounding social intercourse with business affairs, demurred. The interview was compromised for two o'clock the same day at Lamballe's house, a small, exquisitely appointed hotel in the Rue Dominici, just opposite the Chamber of Deputies.

The Ambassador found Lamballe in his study with a pile of newspapers at his elbow, which contained criticisms of his play.

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They appeared to highly amuse the dramatist.

After he had risen to receive his guest, he referred to them with a gesture. "The critics are not so superfluous after all," he said, "since they sometimes teach us what *not* to do."

The Ambassador, with characteristic abruptness, attacked the subject in hand instantler.

"I called to ask for your valuable co-operation in a matter which, curiously enough, is an unattended offshoot of the contention between Ferdinand Lamballe and the United States," he began.

Lamballe altered his manner at once. It had been suave. It turned opaque. His smile vanished. He seemed all ears. The Ambassador felt he was to meet his match in neutrality. The conviction was exhilarating ; it steadied his impulse and equipped his speech.

"In what may I be of service to you?"

The Ambassador rose. He began striding up and down the room, taking care as he did so to cast a glance now and then towards his host, who still remained nonchalantly seated in his chair opposite the window which looked into the street. When Markoe came between him and the light he did not move : he seemed intently listening. He visibly ignored the fact that his antagonist thus had him at a disadvantage, did he betray any emotion or signify discomfort.

"I determined, upon being chosen to fill the post of administrator of Franco-American affairs, to take the bearings of the grounds under discussion into personal consideration immediately upon my arrival on foreign soil," stated Markoe. "I have done so. I brought over with me, from my own country, a surveyor, who for quicksilver methods is unusually competent. I sent him, accompanied by a man who crossed for the purpose at

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my order, down to Carembourg last week to open proceedings."

"Subsequent upon my refusal to treat with you?" inquired Lamballe, with undisguised irritation.

"Just so. I considered that, did you know personally of the immense advantage France would derive upon cessation of the hostilities you have held to, that you and I, being men of sense and not of sensitiveness, men of action and not of ungovernable passions, men of experience and not of unmalleable clay, could come to an understanding."

"You were courageous!"

"Let us say hopeful," corrected the Ambassador.

"As you will. The term is your own." Lamballe's eyes were dancing.

"My visit to-day, however, is not with Carembourg," interpolated the foreign representative. "That issue is one which you and I must fight out later; or, say rather, determine upon. I came to earnestly request your help in instituting a search for a young friend of mine who has mysteriously disappeared."

There was a pause.

Lamballe's eyes grew dark; an extension of the pupils subsequent upon excited heart action, possibly.

"Your surveyor has been made way with?"

There was a polite hint of superficial interest contained in the tone, nothing more.

"You mistake me. Not my surveyor. He is mature, experienced, cautious. The man who has disappeared is the son of a friend of mine, who generously offered to aid me in my explorations, which he desired to personally conduct and oversee. He arrived at Carembourg one Friday night. He oversaw operations for two days. They were practically concluded. The night came on. There was a final question to be determined. He left the inn to do his

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duty, defying, as he did so, poaching laws. You, perhaps, have come in contact with young America?"

Lamballe laughed raspingly. "I have met with it more than once," he affirmed, acridly.

"Quite so," returned Markoe, with a twinkle in his deduction which he peremptorily deterred from mounting to his eyes.

"He set forth in the pouring rain. He did not return," he concluded.

"He possibly lost his way," suggested Lamballe, perfunctorily.

"It is to be supposed that such was the case," returned Markoe, addressing his glance directly at the figure in the chair for the first time. "But supposing he did not lose it? Let us presume some of the servants of the owner of Carembourg were about. They may have only done their duty if they enforced their authority."

"I do not comprehend."

Lamballe was gazing up nonchalantly at the unflinching figure which stood in front of him.

"I mean that the laws of France are rude as regards interlopers. Perhaps those laws are sometimes abused. You have it in your power, monsieur, to inform me if the man who has take it upon himself to aid me in the conquest of individual imperialism may have fallen into a trap."

Lamballe lifted his elbow off the papers near them and propped it on the back of his chair.

"Be seated, monsieur, I beg of you," he said, courteously. "That way we are on a level." The statement was oblique.

Markoe seated himself.

"You accuse me of having made way with your friend?" began Lamballe.

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"Not so. I ask you if you know his whereabouts?"

"And if I did?"

"A direct question demands a direct response among men."

"It is not diplomacy."

"God forbid! In the land of ozone and energy the human brute struggles for supremacy too instinctively to stop to consider in what form his birthright may be clothed."

"Your answer is worthy of yourself. I do not know the whereabouts of your friend."

The Ambassador flashed one glance over the man who confronted him so fearlessly. It expressed belief.

"I thank you for your courtesy."

"It is not courtesy alone. It is truth. I claim the right to deal with you, monsieur, as an honest man should. I shall be glad to proffer you any aid in my power to discover your friend's whereabouts. A man may not disappear in France—even when making inroads into private property—without being traced. We control a detective system which commands the respect of the civilized world. It shall be placed at your service."

The Ambassador remained apparently unimpressed.

"Your personal assistance first," he asked, "I beg."

"It is yours. The man's name?"

"Conway," returned Markoe. Lamballe had pulled up his chair to his desk, and had taken a pencil in hand to inscribe notes in a small leather-bound memorandum book which he opened for the purpose.

It was Markoe's turn to look astonished. Lamballe threw down the pencil he had drawn from his pocket and turned towards him. His face was aglow.

"Your friend, you say, is an American?" he asked, peremptorily.

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"Very much so," returned Markoe, with emphasis. "He is the son of our mutual friend, Mrs. Livingstone Conway ; Madeleine Farragut that was. You may remember, sir, as I do, that we have met before. I knew you twenty years ago when, in the woods of La Vallière, we mutually followed a hawking party in the forest of the Duchesse de Launoy ; an exact copy as possible of those enjoyed in the reign of Francis I."

Lamballe gave a shout. His chastened face beamed with joy. He rose and came forward, both hands outstretched.

"Remember !" he echoed. "Is there any feature of all that joyous time which Ferdinand Lamballe could forget?"

The Ambassador was forced to take the hands which were extended towards him.

"It seems to me," cried Lamballe,—fifteen minutes had expired in which the two had been exchanging experiences,—"something told me the first time my eyes fell upon you that I had discovered a friend."

"Nothing more likely, if friendship were not so obviously a disinterested function," responded Markoe. "In my case I do not hesitate to say, considering our mutual disagreement, that it does not yet fill that exalted niche."

"Your practical habit rebels against sentiment?" Lamballe suggested.

"Not so ; business first, pleasure afterwards. I am glad to discover you a man of parts instead of the youth I once knew, whose zeal seemed bent on capturing hearts ; a zeal worthy of a higher cause. You have discovered the cause. I congratulate you."

"And you !" returned Lamballe, after bowing gravely in response to Markoe's look of warm approval. "You are a representative man ; a servant sent forth by his government ; an official dove carrying the emblem of trust.

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Maturity insures a weight of saddest accumulation, sorrows, losses. It is bearable, however, if, with its unwilling acquirement, it registers influence."

The two adversaries contemplated one another with kindling eyes.

"I shall consider my service a failure if young Conway is left missing for long," vouchsafed Markoe.

"What age is he? Tell me his habits; I can foresee nothing which, with a trifling expenditure of time, may not be vanquished."

The Ambassador placed the matter before Lamballe in a nutshell.

The Parisian expected, perhaps, a week's delay, he told Markoe finally. If Conway could be proved to have come up to Paris, the secret service should be set at once discovering his whereabouts. If he had remained at Carembourg, Lamballe's servants were many and able. "Leave the affair in my hands," he concluded.

The Ambassador recognized that a more generous proposition could not have been proffered. He rose.

"I thank you," he said, in his crisp voice. "It is a singular coincidence that should have sent me your way concerning a grievance. It seemed to me no lesser plan was feasible. I discovered the night of your première that you possessed a keener perception than my compatriots generally take time to acquire, and exercised a philanthropy which is praiseworthy. I am pleased to learn that you practise what you preach."

The Ambassador knew by this that the Latin exacts a surface courtesy which the Anglo-Saxon ignores in his irrelevant appliance of the maxim that time is money.

"I have a stranger within my gates," observed Lamballe, suavely. "He must go forth happier than when he came. I will do my best to give him back his own."

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But as Lamballe proffered his aid he did not allow himself to forget that he who so frankly demanded of him influence and intricate handling of a difficult situation was seeking at one and the same time to despoil him of a cherished portion of his territory. The Frenchman felt for the foreigner the antagonism which is the natural result of an international encounter. His visitor seemed to discover pleasure in unveiling what the distinguished Parisian delighted to disguise,—tenacity and a love of power. He worded what the imperialist secreted,—audacity. He coarsened what the dramatist had elected to refine,—authority. But his manner was so breezy, his self-respect so actual, his purpose so frank, that this born conservative saw himself for the first time, as the scion of an unances-tried race had found him all along, a fine fingerer of emotions, a meddler in morals. The American's reach commanded a wider horizon. He stood, in his crude courage, confessed of but the straightforward policy of duty. His religion had health for its symbol and clean-thinking for its god. His fetich was simplicity.

As the dramatist took leave of his guest he promised to forward him a messenger each day with the latest information.

"As I said before," remarked Markoe,—he was standing in the doorway, the sun shone straight across his high-strung face,—“that play of yours evinced purpose and will. But wouldn't it be wiser to coin your purpose instead of accentuating other people's lack of it? I fancy a man goes farther if he handles his own throttle-valve.”

He did not wait for a reply. He merely threw the suggestion off hurriedly, as if it were born that moment, to die the next. But the hint contained so marked an accent of good fellowship that his listener glowed all through.

"It does not surprise me that you ignore difficulties in

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our search for Conway," the speaker subjoined. "I fancy it is to your taste, isn't it, to burrow?"

He looked right into his adversary's eyes.

"Which part of my play did you like most?" inquired Lamballe.

Markoe's face kindled. He stepped out of the vestibule to the steps which descended to the street. "There is no doubt but that your third act is the strongest, if the lines are to be trusted," he responded.

"Why not trusted?" retorted Lamballe, inquisitively.

The Ambassador turned. The shrewd lines at the corners of his colorless eyes deepened. "The third act always presupposes the fourth, sometimes for good, sometimes for bad,—doesn't it?" he asked.

"You speak advisedly," cried Lamballe.

"I am forty-two years old, and I have not ceased to hope," returned Markoe.

"There is a double edge to his speech," reflected Lamballe, as he returned to his study. Then he dismissed the thought, and seated himself to write a line to a powerful constituent.

In an hour his bidden friend presented himself; a man who for official subtlety stood alone.

He was the Prefect of Police.



CHAPTER XXVIII

A LIGHT WITH SHADOWED RAYS

FROM the now registered fact of buying a return ticket at the little station of Carembourg the evening of June 10, the purchaser clothed in a slouch hat pulled down to his brows, a muffler which reached to his eyes, a pair of

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muddy, rain-soaked boots, and a small bag slung across the left shoulder, Jack Conway had gone out as effectually as if a tidal wave had overflowed the borders of traffic and civilization and engulfed him.

Lamballe himself faithful to his promise, which he set in motion instantly, subjoined with a personal supervision which was above praise, started his own private force at work together with the public officers of investigation, commanding them in this case to show their colors instead of establishing a record for incompetence which would have an echo across the seas. In spite of consummate skill, of influence above par,—the diplomatic foreign circle was concerned with Conway's mysterious disappearance, the rest of the world being kept in ignorance in strict accordance with the United States representative's express orders,—the horizon seemed swept forever of that glad young figure which had set forth with so steadfast a purpose to conclude the simplest errand in the world.

His friends had not recognized until now how important a niche he had filled. To-day they acknowledged in him their joy-barometer. For sunshine had come with him, and rain had settled down for evermore where he was not. An unimportant figure enough, perhaps, compared with the men and women who had fought and bled and died conspicuously, applauded by the multitude, log-rolled for achievement, socially lionized or approved of ; but none the less a good son ; and faithful as a friend ; and true. He had done his share in making one or two people happy, if merely through the fact of a vivid existence which sought feverishly after pastures new. The little circle who loved him came, in these days, to considering that his restless love of travel had not signified self-indulgence altogether, but perhaps the unconscious fluttering of the soul to try its wings in broader spheres ; that his eager clutch of the

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opportunity his fellow-countryman had proffered him pointed to a painful self-acknowledgment of insignificance.

Mrs. Conway's sad face grew so wistful and peaked that the Ambassador and his wife, added to their mutual consciousness that they had been the unwitting cause of the present unhappy state of things, grew more and more alarmed. Markoe became visibly careworn. He spent all his spare hours concocting plans with Lamballe, who by this time had come to being the consoler and indefatigable suggester.

But it was Kate Markoe, either because of a too acute aptitude for sympathy, or a forced wooing of irregular buoyancy, feverish and fluctuating as the weak flutter of a sick insect, or by way of feigning a false courage which she fondly believed might strengthen the little circle about her, presented a picture which the Ambassador acknowledged day by day with more and more discomfiting disquietude.

The Ambassador's wife had boasted her short life through of having sprung from New England stock.

But society had taught Mrs. Markoe her value. Knowledge of the world had set its seal against her mutinous lips and in the fascinating depths of her inscrutable eyes.

Until now Stephen Markoe had been too loyal to allow that she was spoiled. This summer she evinced moods so mercurial, manners so elusive, ways so utterly out of gear with any presupposed contingency that, whereas in the Ambassador's ordinary tread-mill of duty the fact of her fickle treatment of life would have passed by him unremarked, now, with every sense strained to its utmost, she represented an anomaly which defied his closest inspection.

She was "fond of being alone," she said, when her husband questioned her as to the cause of her frequent trips to Paris, from which she returned white as the driven snow, a dim light in her eyes which predicted the ensuing day's inevitable collapse. She felt "overdone," she would

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murmur pitifully as an excuse for any discrepancy in her statements as to what she had purchased, or where she had been. She was "dull"; she "desired diversion." Fontainebleau, in spite of its glorious forest and splendid palace, she discovered hot and flat. Whereas her household duties had always been foremost,—she was a woman who made it part of her creed to most religiously observe her husband's interests in the small details of fare and comfort,—she now neglected to give her personal attention to anything but vague and dreamy guesses as to what the end would be.

She was peevish, too, and self-conscious. Markoe saw the tears on her cheeks once after an interview with Mrs. Conway, in which Jack's mother had been greatly startled at the Ambassadors, suddenly, with the most touching humility, bending over her and sobbing in a choked, guilty voice, that she would "give her life to help Jack's mother!"

"Your life is too helpful and sweet a thing, Kate, to throw it away so lightly," Mrs. Conway had returned. She attributed her friend's hysterical speech to a trip she had made up to Paris the day before which had brought her home on the midnight train,—a fact which the Ambassador had peremptorily forbidden to occur again.

"You may consider it unobjectionable to be seen at that hour alone;" he said, "but the Ambassador must not lay herself open to questioning. You forget that you have a marked personality, and that your movements will be considered undignified in our present position if you overstep a certain path laid down by propriety."

She had looked back at him tearfully when he made his speech, standing steadily under the lamp which swung from the roof of the porte cochère regarding her ominously. She saw,—with a choking sob welling up in her throat, a sensation with which she was becoming curiously

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familiar, a feeling which she fought out in the privacy of her own room with clinched fists (the limp aspect she presented the following day confirmed this)—that his face was set, its expression invincibly stern.

"I am pleased that you care a little," she whispered gratefully as she passed him, to his intense surprise.

He had thought she would flash out some rejoinder, of which she always carried a fuller equipment than most women. Her complete and visible subjection made him wince.

"You understand, I cannot have my wife laid open to misinterpretations," he blurted out, following her, striving blindly, in a mannish way, to make up for the roughness of his rebuke.

But she was not to be appeased, it seemed.

"I need sleep," she said, without turning.

And as he stood, most helplessly, watching her graceful back as she climbed the stairs, he wondered, with a sharp stab, if rest would ever be his portion in this world.

Markoe entered his private office one muggy day in September to find a figure standing, with its back to him, before a small wood fire which his office-boy had laid to greet him. There had been a harbinger of autumn in the air, as he drove from the Gare de Lyons to the Embassy in his open trap. As his footsteps crossed the threshold the figure turned. The act disclosed a smug countenance with hair chopped short front and sides, and left long at the back.

"Lubin !" he cried.

"At monsieur's service."

There had been a stormy interview some weeks before in which Lubin had come out second best. The Ambassador had declared in outspoken terms his opinion that the French detective service was not worth its salt ; that for stupendous inefficiency it out-Heroded Herod.

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Lubin had listened to his employer's peroration with compressed lips and flaming eyes. When it was concluded he had asked to be let off. To this the Ambassador, with contempt, had acquiesced. Since then Lubin had pursued a search of his own, the result of which he had come to offer for a consideration.

When the amount of the consideration had been discussed—to be gauged by the value of the information disclosed—Lubin spoke,—

“I came to say I discovered a clue. I could have informed monsieur of this clue some weeks since, had monsieur signified the respect for my talents I have always been led to consider was their due. Rather, however, than plead for justice, or yet offer a loophole of hope which might lift monsieur onto a pinnacle of joy, only to be dashed to the ground, a state of things which monsieur contemplates with less indifference than we humbler individuals who are obliged to cultivate patience,”—this rebuke with a deliberation which highly elated his listener,—“I waited. Monsieur will, sans doute, find fault with my methods ; it is his way. He will be unreasonable, indeed, does he also repudiate my facts.”

“It is not the facts I am receiving,” grumbled Markoe, impatiently. “This is what I should call a prelude, Lubin. I would advise you, in Americanese, to ‘go ahead.’”

Lubin was not a scholar of any proved penetration ; but he had encountered slack too often not to recognize when he came in contact with fire.

“I hesitate, because with my disclosure I fear to annoy Monsieur l’Ambassadeur,” he ventured.

“As for that, my annoyances are daily increasing,” cried Markoe. “For unadulterated cussedness give me the present situation, which should have been cleared up in a month,—and would have been elsewhere,” he concluded,

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under his breath. "Out with your news, Lubin. If red tape is in the way, we will down that."

Lubin's little, congested face reddened. His eyes grew beady. He pompously drew himself up. He began,—

"I have monsieur's permission, then, to speak of what I know? We are alone?"

Markoe's sole response to this question was to draw the curtain of a window which looked across the avenue, which for width and space had led him to choose it for a place of residence and sanitary comfort. He said, returning to his chair, "We are alone."

"We will imagine the case given up in the first place," murmured Lubin, in his sing-song voice. "Monsieur will remember that it was but the 13th of June when he signified to me that my services might be discontinued. I sallied forth with a sickening sense of failure. Mine is not the character which holds its victim by the eyelids, promising aid when I see no hope of hinting at accomplishment which later may not be substantiated. Rather, I get myself disliked. Monsieur only played into my hands when he did me the honor to dismiss me," triumphantly. "But I never let go. Those who know Lubin call him the bull-dog. For tenacity, monsieur, Lubin has no equal. Only death stands in the way of his fight for justice." The congested face was lifted with a radiant expression of self-approval.

"An admirable state of things," interpolated the Ambassador. He had by this time concluded to let the little man have his say. He was burning with impatience; but he had learned within the past few weeks that the Latin race must always play its rôle,—itself a chosen, and invariably approving, audience.

"As I sauntered forth I saw the most noble Ambassadors's carriage drive from the courtyard into the alley-way towards the street. The Ambassadors descended, attired

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in a violet creation which so ravished my humble vision that I stopped short, consumed with the profoundest appreciation. She stepped into her carriage. I stood still for no reason whatsoever, unless the desire a modest soul experiences to profit off the generously exhibited charms of the illustrious. The carriage of the Ambassadors but turned the corner before, after slowly rolling down the Cours la Reine, it stopped before an apartment house in the Avenue d'Iéna. I had hardly realized this fact—I was idly strolling up and down the Avenue de Trocadero the while, my hands in my pockets, my thoughts warring against my own impotence to discover a clue to that mysterious affair at Carembourg—when I saw the same bewildering violet creation vision roll past me again, this time towards the Louvre. I remember thinking to myself that did I have the same leisure at my command I would frequent the Bois rather than do a round of shopping indoors. Then I recollected the duties of a society queen, and decided to make my way to the Rue Royale to interview a fellow-operator. The consciousness of failure was nettling me like a brier. As I passed down the Rue Royale, after descending from the Porte Maillot omnibus, a figure in violet drove past me again. It was the figure of the Ambassadors, but this time she was in a fiacre! Full of the enigma which was puzzling me—it was only after she had passed me I came into the knowledge that this time she had been in a fiacre—I wondered! Had she met with an accident? Had she substituted a common hackney for her own luxurious victoria? No. For just here her own carriage passed me empty, going towards the Bois. Monsieur may imagine that a man who has for years considered it his duty to unravel mysteries has a sense which puts him on the track of a new scent, the way a dog smells out a bird. I followed the fiacre which contained the Ambassadors without further ado."

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"She drove home, and again you were nonplussed!"

The voice was vibrant. The Ambassador's hand had lifted, and was scooped above his brows. His face, thus, was in shadow.

"Pardon me. Not so. The Ambassadors had tied a thick veil over her face—when I was not looking. But I knew I could not be mistaken in her figure, which is markedly tall and graceful. When she reached the Rue Drouot she alighted before a wine-shop, paid her cocher, and dismissed him. Then, after parleying for five minutes or so with a small urchin, to whom she gave two francs for his information, she climbed a flight of stairs, and knocked on a door upon which was imprinted, in big letters, one word."

"That word?"

"Was Mariotti."

The Ambassador did not move.



CHAPTER XXIX

CHECKMATE

"MONSIEUR may not be aware that Mariotti is a clown who has been in evidence some time in Paris because of a certain genius he possesses for amusing the public. In my opinion he is a charlatan. But this, to the public, is a matter of indifference. It welcomes—I have discovered—humbug more uproariously than worth. The first requires no effort. The second manifestly exacts thought. So humbug goes."

"You left the Ambassadors at Mariotti's?"

"My name is Lubin! The idea of her collusion with the charlatan appeared to me more and more odious as I

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stood there under the frowning arch of a neighboring building. That this most beauteous lady should have cause to confer with so distinguished a rascal as Mariotti roused all my inquisitiveness. I waited. After a half-hour's time she descended the stairs rapidly, and looked about her fearfully,—monsieur will pardon me for my adverbs,”—at the Ambassador's fierce scowl and gesture of almost uncontrollable impatience. “She hailed a fiacre and drove home. This time Mariotti followed her. He evidently was desirous too of unearthing her identity. When she arrived at her home she alighted. So did he. She dismissed her cab. Ditto Mariotti. After she entered the Embassy Mariotti crept past the wall where I stood placidly eyeing a mason at work on a scaffolding, and darted into the grocer's near, then the chemist's, and across the road to be lost to view. I bought a stamp at the tobacconist's, who told me the Gascon had just called there to inquire who lived at 61 Avenue Marceau, at the chemist's, who rattled off a dissertation about American fortunes,—leading me to suppose that it had been a recent subject of conversation with him and at the grocer's, who was dumb. After that I went home.”

“If you have finished——”

“Monsieur is premature; I have not finished. This was two months ago. The affair had almost escaped my memory, when one day, not long since, I caught up a penny sheet let loose on the boulevards which related, in gigantic type, the rise of the clown Mariotti. I went to his play-house, a new one, which has been built by some magic in two months in the place of the old house, a broken-down and dingy specimen of decay. There is no doubt the Gascon's star is in the ascendant. But from where does he obtain his funds? That is the question, a riddle which remained unsolved until recently.”

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Lubin, who up to this had stood modestly at a distance from his listener, now moved forward with a look of cunning pervading his square, undersized form. His little eyes gleamed with that concentrated light which flames up in the orbs of a viper when its forked tongue prepares to dart out and perform its deadly work with unfaltering skill. His words tumbled over one another in their author's eagerness to betray his own extraordinary prowess. He forgot that the man he addressed cherished the woman the detective was accusing like the core of his heart. If he remembered it, he ignored it, as lesser mortals ignore those refinements which go to make up the fibre of a higher instinct.

"Yesterday I completed a scheme which I have been carrying out for weeks," murmured Lubin, proudly. "Detection governs an arena which demands rare ingenuity of control. I patched some pieces together that had come in my way through an inadvertence. I had made an exhaustive inquiry as to Mariotti's ways and means. The former were less difficult to explain than the latter. Nobody could in the least determine the fellow's unfathomable means of livelihood. To be sure, he was turning crowds away nightly from his theatre, but his expenditures far exceeded his profits, and what puzzled me was where did he obtain the funds with which to establish himself so luxuriously, whereas only six months ago his reputation had been synonymous with everything that was sordid and commonplace. There was another thought which warred in my veins,—a burr in my nostrils. This was how madame the Ambassadors could have deigned to take notice of a humble clown who by his comrades is designated as the slipperiest eel of his species. Yesterday the riddle was solved! I had an errand which took me into the quarter of the Gare de Lyons. Monsieur will believe

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that no vulgar curiosity prompted the action. I confess, however, that, upon perceiving the Ambassadors alight from an incoming train, I had the temerity to jump into a fiacre and follow a liveried hack which met her at the station. She drove straight to Mariotti's quarters. I stood outside. In my soul there lurked the deprecation of a humble observer of ills who deplores the whims of a great lady who, by circumstance, is deprived of that contact with mankind which teaches us subordinates the law that much is better left unturned."

"Spare me your asides," interpolated the Ambassador at this issue, in a low voice. "State facts." His under lip was bitten in between his strong teeth until it looked like a line of stiffened pink clay. His hand, which hung over the arm of his chair, opened and shut restlessly.

"I am done. I saw Mariotti accompany the Ambassador to her carriage. She was very white. Her veil was up. There were tears in her eyes. He was bowing and scraping, curving in and out, as he walked with her across the pavings. I crept up close. They neither of them perceived me,—by this that had been a matter of indifference. She handed him a roll of bank-notes from a small satchel she carried and made use of these words: 'I beseech you make haste, Mariotti. My patience is almost spent.'

"'Madame has trusted me thus far,' the rogue answered her through his teeth. 'The affair will take time, I have told her.'

"'Time!' she echoed, despairingly, almost with a sob. 'It has been three months already.' Then she entered her carriage and drove away. I was torn between two desires: to keep watch of Mariotti and to follow her. I chose Mariotti. I have said this was yesterday."

"But——"

Lubin interrupted. "When the Ambassador said the

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affair had been three months already, I set my wits at work in another corner of my brain. What had been 'three months'? Why, the strange disappearance of Monsieur Conway! Mariotti must, then, have a clue. I decided to wait, but so sure was I monsieur must know of this enlightenment I came here to-day to inform him of it. I will dog Mariotti's footsteps hereafter until I know every corner of his life. It might be wise if Monsieur l'Ambassadeur questioned madame the Ambassadorsess."

"Your suggestion is superfluous. The Ambassadorsess is a law unto herself."

If Markoe's authoritative words just here harbored an irony which, in spite of him, revealed itself, he was unconscious of it. He was bitterly aware only that his wife was pursuing some secret chimera which had not been submitted to him. Apart from the indignation he felt that she had chosen to deceive him, there had sprung to life a memory which, strive as he might, stood forward strongly potent to undo him; the memory of a sentence which her pallid lips had let forth the evening she had fainted upon hearing the news of Conway's disappearance. "I have been very weak and foolish," she had whispered. Had she referred, in her womanly breakdown, to a mental or a moral consciousness? He could not tell. She was his pearl of great price. Flawless, he was certain; but had her love of admiration carried her too far into that land of insatiable ambition which is the unhappy niche of the vain and frivolous?

"I consider that you have been guilty of an impertinence, Lubin," vouchsafed the Ambassador.

Lubin looked bitterly crestfallen.

"It may be the privilege of professional experts to root out the doings of private individuals, but I doubt it. Mrs. Markoe is a patroness of Mariotti; he is a man of rare

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talent, notwithstanding his fantastic version of life. He is but one of the many charitable objects upon which the Ambassadors confers her patronage *with my permission.*"

Lubin looked piercingly back at the eyes which were regarding him so resolutely and with such cutting contempt. A gleam came into his own, the gleam of the cat that fears the possible escape of her victim.

"Monsieur was then aware that the Ambassadors visited Mariotti?"

"Since when have you constituted yourself the detective of my private affairs?"

"Since monsieur did me the honor to appoint me his servant. A master may not be a hero to his valet. The strings of justice are often complicated. I have done my duty only in striving to unearth Monsieur Conway's whereabouts. I shall now consider Mariotti. If Monsieur l'Ambassadeur desires that I discontinue my study of the main issue which threw him in my path he shall be obeyed."

Lubin's face was as bland and artless as a school-boy's.

"That is my command. The Ambassadors is in no manner whatsoever concerned in the accident of Conway's disappearance. Understand! We will leave her name out of the question altogether."

The Ambassador was frowning heavily.

Lubin bowed and moved backward a little towards the door.

"In a week's time," said Markoe, "you may call again at this hour, and give me all the information you may have obtained in the interim about Mariotti."

Lubin withdrew.

Then Markoe rose heavily. He walked to his desk and turned over some letters which lay there. As he did so a blue envelope came to view surmounted with an unas-

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suming French crest in superlatively good taste. The Ambassador drew the letter from the envelope ; it had been read already ; its contents considered. It was an invitation from the proprietor of Carembourg requesting the United States representative, his wife, and Mrs. Conway to come and spend the week, beginning the next day, at his château.

The turn of events was astonishing. The enemy had placed himself in his hands. He had determined to decline his hospitality, fully recognizing the generosity of the man who had chosen to ignore international difficulties during a period of almost intolerable annoyance. But as he stood with the letter in his hand, gradually a plan formulated,—a growth which was a rank output of the past half-hour's protest. He would go to Carembourg, because the play was a good play, and the situation promised a racy development. He would accept Lamballe's invitation, as a friend instead of an usurper. He would respond as the invited guest of the man who trusted him and whom he trusted with that grim sense of admiration which he was every day more slowly and surely admitting. He would accompany Mrs. Markoe and, of course, Mrs. Conway for distraction. The two women were anxious to accept Lamballe's genial hospitality. They were consumed with an anxiety which would, in a faint measure, be assuaged by new scenes and new faces. They needed the change.

If at one and the same time Mrs. Markoe would be under the surveillance of her husband through daily intercourse, if her moods might thus be subjected to a skilful observation, this visit would accomplish the object of determining some interrogations in the wounded and unconsidered brain of the provider of her charitable expenditures and thereby attain the dignity of a master-stroke.

Killing two birds with one stone is often a successful

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albeit a daring process. The Ambassador while deploring the fact of his wife's perfidy simultaneously recognized his right to exercise the prerogative of a commanding position.

At Carembourg she would be constantly on view ; an honored guest, she must round the week out. There would be no excuse in those seven days for mysterious visits to Paris. There would be little reason for complaint. *Noblesse oblige*. She must play her chosen part straight through to the bitter end in public, not in private, before an audience which contemplated her variable moods with keenest attentiveness and unflagging diligence.

As the Ambassador dictated an acceptance to his secretary his neutral eyes presented a new, curiously steadfast aspect of defiance, which, before he reached Fontainebleau that night, had set in coldest steel.



CHAPTER XXX

AT CAREMBOURG

THE Ambassador and his wife were made to feel unlimited hospitality by their host from the moment they left Paris, with Mrs. Conway and her maid, until they reached the ivy-covered nook which flourished under the dignified sobriquet of station in the dimple between the hills, upon one of which stood forth, gauntly stripped of superfluous detail, the château.

Lamballe and his servants met the little party at the station in two open landaus drawn by superbly caparisoned steeds. It was not long before, after a refreshing drive through a rolling country which to the jaded traveller's interested gaze seemed to unfold gently like a panorama especially created for their delight, they were driven into a

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vast court-yard. Quaint old-worldiness and curious nooks and crannies prepared them somewhat for the musical clang of a silver-toned bell. This clamored noisily as they drove across a low stone bridge barred off from the castle with a portcullis which had stood guard for centuries over a moat which hemmed in the château grounds.

Once inside the moat the château—a battered granite thing of severe outlines and intrinsic beauty—loomed before them against a cool, green, silent background of everlasting hills. For peacefulness and stateliness, as a retreat from the bustling market-place far away to the west, against whose horizon could be seen at intervals a fluctuating trail of smoke, the only vaporous smirch against the limpidest of landscapes, it was not difficult to imagine why the owner of Carembourg valued his worldly paradise with reason as a balm for any and every unrest.

The full glory of the view, however, only came home to the little party of foreign guests later, when they had entered and gathered together in a vast hall with wide windows and an unobstructed view of the laughing valley below. As in all feudal principalities, the village nestled in the valley at the foot of the mountain ; the château stood alone on its isolated peak at the top of the hills, majestically presiding over the hazy melting sky, the capricious valley, and the sentinel rows of undulating peaks.

The Carembourg valley was wide, dented in the middle like a woman's breast. The fulnesses thereof rose on either side. One of these was known as Wallindorf, and the other as Carembourg. Carembourg consisted chiefly of its castle ; Wallindorf solely of a straggling village, presided over by a vine-clad promontory, which loomed above it sombrely and cut off the vanishing orb of day, casting long shadows across its road-ways a full half-hour before the other portion of the valley had done shimmer-

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ing in the sunshine. It was through the middle of this shadowed portion of the valley across which fluttered the long, broad line of scarlet which, like a sluggish life-stream, grew wan and gray with each autumn's frosty breath, as though to refute the past summer's glowing protest. Like the commanding generals of two advancing armies the peaks confronted one another defiantly, the long, red line, like a bloody chasm, between.

This view alone might have been responsible in great measure for Ferdinand Lamballe's love of country and detestation of a nation which had so ruthlessly, if justly, demanded her pound of flesh when her enemy was at her mercy. The burning sense of chagrin, abetted by a constant contemplation of a past defeat, fostered that suppurating wound which under more moderate auspices might have healed or been appeased.

Life at Carembourg was one of those semi-Bohemian, gloriously benevolent things which are dreamt of, but seldom realized. For munificent hospitality, for royal benevolence, each guest his own master, president of his individual suite, governor of his time and his inclination, it was like a collection of little states in one household, where a systematic regulation wheeled its mechanism in and out noiselessly, the recipients thereof made aware of but one paramount fact—that they were welcome.

Markoe fished furiously the first few days with his host, who escorted him like a laughing child from his galleries to his wine-cellars, from his stables to his poultry-yards and conservatories, to then, with a sweeping gesture, pronounce this entire magnificent domain at his guest's disposal. There was so much ingenuousness in this simple, great-hearted man whom fate had frowned upon only to be lifted up, that his bonhomie remained with Markoe more and more as his prejudices drifted out.

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That international complication was a tabooed subject in these days ; tacitly they all ignored it, until the grave problem which was undermining much of their pleasure and all of their peace had been either conquered or set at rest. So that the odd spectacle of the United States Ambassador fishing and hunting on the very land which a few weeks before had been the sorest point of contention between two nations merged itself into an every-day fact, instead of confirming, as it might have done under other auspices, a triumph or defeat.

The Ambassadors and Mrs. Conway had been overjoyed to find among Lamballe's select party Marguerite, Duchesse de Launoy. She was temporarily established as *châtelaine* in their honor. This rare woman refurbished old memories, instituted diversions, and suggested amusements which made the two sad guests almost forget the insidious growth which was faster and faster quenching any capacity for enjoyment in their sickening veins.

The kindness displayed at this time, the delicacy of feeling expressed without being worded, the anxiety forestalled, the shielding care administered by Lamballe and the Duchesse, were elements never forgotten in after years by their guests. It would have been the most natural of errors to have surprised the wound, to have exposed and irritated the supposition which was gradually taking shuddering secret form and substance with them all, that Conway's disappearance was to become one of those hideous, too frequent features of so-called modern civilization which defy any adequate translation.

But the subject, if discussed, was so tenderly handled, the reaction subsequent to such unavoidable communion so delicately felt, the underlying pursuit so dauntlessly carried on, that words alone could not have conveyed the gratitude or the appreciation of Conway's mother or that of his friends.

AT CAREMBOURG

After those two first days in which the Ambassador had, with a settled melancholy in his gaze, contemplated his wife's delicate face with changed eyes, an event came crashing through their nest of temporary tranquillity which sorely tried him.

He had gone, one morning early, with fishing paraphernalia, to meet his host, who, the night before, had been called suddenly to Paris on an undivulged errand. The two had agreed to unite forces, the following morning at daybreak, on the border of a trout stream which tore through the fastnesses of the forest, tossing, turning, gleaming, gliding in all the prismatic evolutions of a released soul.

Burgess was still at Carembourg. He had a theory of his own in regard to young Conway's whereabouts which he stolidly refused to divulge. He had remained at the little inn ever since the sad going out of his young master, with a dogged fidelity to the place which had last harbored the strong young figure, more like a dog's than a man's.

Lamballe did not appear at the rendezvous.

Markoe, after an enchanting morning in which he had battled with the gamest trout he had ever captured, soaked with the tossing current in which he had stood knee-deep, wrestling with the elements,—it was a wild day, with nips of frost in the air, gleams of capricious sunshine, and wind which roared along the valley with hoarsening vehemence,—finally concluded his host had been detained in Paris. He fastened his captured adversaries together, disposed of them in a neat little basket lined with freshest moss, which he had prepared for this auspicious contingency, should it materialize,—which it had done with becoming subservience to the distinction of Lamballe's guest,—and, lifting his rod over his shoulder, made his way towards a small

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hut near the edge of the road, some distance from Carembourg, to disentangle his fishing-tackle. It seemed to the Ambassador's slightly vague calculation, as he approached it, to be quite across the dividing line which had been pointed out to him. Was the hut a German possession or a French? he was asking himself, when he heard voices.

He stopped an instant, instinctively lending his ear to the intonations of an organ whose familiar accent arrested his attention.

"Oh, tell it all to me," it pleaded,—the tones were a woman's, broken, tear-fraught. "All, from the beginning,—the very beginning to the end."

Then Burgess's voice with its common utterance recounted the old story patiently, not omitting one detail of the journey to Carembourg, the two days' exhaustive survey, the sudden determination on the surveyor's part to conclude their errand, and Conway's assumption of the surveyor's duty.

"He said nothing to lead you to suppose he would not come back?" the feminine voice inquired, still brokenly.

Burgess hesitated. He scraped his throat.

The Ambassador had walked forward towards the little hut; but as the two figures, which his view commanded, stood with their backs turned towards him, they were, as yet, unaware of his presence.

He heard Burgess say slowly,—

"Yes; there was one thing, mum, I remember afterwards; he says, 'If by any chance I should not cum back, there is a telegraph blank in my valise.' He also hands me at this the seal from off his watch-chain, sayin' it might 'betray his identity' should he be stopped. Yer see, mum, it's the Conway crest. An iron hand in a velvet glove."

"Give it to me."

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There was a pause here, and the trinket was handed over.

"You think, then, he was fearful he might be——?"

The Ambassador arrested his footsteps in astonished recognition. The voice was his wife's!



CHAPTER XXXI

DEFIANCE

SHE stood, attired in a filmy black morning gown, her pale face strained and ill-looking, absorbing the surveyor's words with a look of anguished anxiety which could not be gainsaid.

In her hand she held Conway's seal: an intaglio set in dull gold.

"I had told him, mum, thet the French poaching laws promised no quarter. He seemed to like thet. I think even now he may be in the hands of some of them slippery French coves, Lamballe's servants, unbeknownst to their boss. These 'ere foreigners ain't like us. They has ways and means that 'ud stump a government mule. I ain't presumin' to criticise Mr. Markoe's business, but I dare say to you, mum, thet it's my opinion thet yer Frenchman is in the way o' pullin' the wool over yer eyes this time to hide his own wickedness."

"That will do, Burgess," interrupted the Ambassadors, imperiously. "You may go now. Say nothing to any one."

Burgess's clumsy figure slunk off quietly. He did not look back. If he had done so he would have seen the Ambassador deliberately sling his fishing paraphernalia off

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his shoulder, dispose it on a flat stone near, and stride forward.

Mrs. Markoe was seated on a dilapidated chair, which stood in the doorway of the deserted hut, rocking herself to and fro with a slow monotonous movement whose measured nodding increased rapidly.

The trinket was between her fingers. She fingered it wistfully. She drew her handkerchief from her pocket now. As the Ambassador approached—so near that he would have had but to extend his hand to reach her shoulder—she buried her face in it and shook with sobs.

It was fully ten minutes before her weeping ceased. It seemed the accumulation of weeks. It was such a hopeless weeping, with so quietly resigned a despair in this, its confession, it seemed a mood so familiarly and frequently coped with. It echoed of the secret misery of a woman's heart which strives and struggles to conceal its agony until the sluice-gates break way ; then the freshet drips through, gently at first, then thicker, then stronger, until all at once the warring flood bursts all bounds ; a mighty power which lacerates and destroys.

When she finished she looked up, her eyes dimmed, her lips swollen, her hands folding and unfolding the little square of cambric, which, with its embroidered, lace-edged border, was such a mean receptacle for such a grief as her tears betrayed. The trinket fell to the ground.

As she lifted her swollen lids she saw her husband.

It might have been ten seconds, it might have been three full minutes, before he spoke. She could not have told afterwards the time words took to express that wounded look of his, which for unmitigated endurance she never forgot.

"You are in bitterest trouble,—and you have not told me !"

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It was not a reproach alone. Any other interpretation he might have given to this stolen interview, any suspicion voiced in the tone of authority some husbands adopt as their portion of the vow which has been exchanged between them and the woman they love at the altar, would have been easier to bear or defy. It was the genuine cry of a great soul which has been left unconsidered when its foremost desire has been to help.

"You would not understand," she broke out huskily, still twisting the wisp-like fragment of cambric and lace between her fingers.

"Is there anything in all the world, concerning you, which could be incomprehensible to me?"

"Yes," she said, with a mad uplift in her over a secret longing, which once, not so long ago, she had quenched for his sake. "There are things in us women which you men may not understand." Hers was now a fierce clutch for the sole ownership of that spiritual consciousness which comes to all womanhood in maturity,—that no one may live with and for them the inner life. With it they must wrestle and vanquish unaided.

At any other time the isolation of such an acknowledgment would have disclosed its paramount deficiency. To-day harrowed up, at war with herself, she clung to it desperately.

He said firmly,—the light had died out of his brooding eyes now, they were colorless, dead, drained of everything but a prayer, which was fast threatening to undo him,—

"I am willing to judge your trouble mercifully if it is put before me now, at once, Kate, in all frankness. I cannot answer if you keep me in the dark much longer for myself."

"A threat!"

He continued as though he had not heard her,—

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"Or for you !"

It was evident his ultimatum had gone forth.

"I have nothing to say."

"Nothing?"

"Next to nothing. I came here to-day to ask Mr. Burgess if he could throw any new light upon Jack Conway's absence?"

"He knows nothing. I would not have kept you in the dark as to Burgess's ignorance had you told me of your anxiety."

"You, in all probability, heard what we had to say," evasively. "I have had my walk for naught."

She had risen. Two fiery, crimson spots glowed on either cheek. Her attitude was the old defiant,—was it a brazen one? Her flesh looked—he caught himself acknowledging this with a desperate feeling—more than ever divinely transparent. How slender she had grown! Her hand was almost emaciated. It was evident she was harboring some misery which he must, at all costs, root up.

"Your interest in Conway is kind, and conducted with your customary passion for sympathy. What concerns me, however, is the fact that you choose to pursue your researches without my knowledge. I might be of service to you."

The Ambassador had seated himself in the doorway, perhaps aware that by this manœuvre he blocked his wife's egress. His strong face, its profile sharply outlined against the landscape, seemed of granite. His manner was chiefly composed of invulnerable patience. It also evinced resolve.

"I am at a loss to understand why, in this matter as in so many others, you do not allow me entire liberty to pursue my own way?"

"There are two reasons,"—still with that severe profile

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set like a brown cameo against the distant horizon,—the words came through his handsome unbearded lips with a curt emphasis which disclosed they had already been thought out and decided upon. “The first is that the Ambassadress is not sufficiently conversant with professional methods to conduct herself with adequate caution. The second is that her name must not be coupled with Conway’s in any manner whatsoever.” The tone was authoritative.

“You leap at conclusions.”

Mrs. Markoe had seated herself with forced calm.

“Pardon me, I know of what I speak. You are pursuing a secret policy of your own, which—I beg you will not accuse me of interference—must be terminated at all hazards. I have come upon it, Kate, unwittingly,” turning now, and looking quietly into his wife’s gradually paling face, at her trembling lips, at her drooping lids, which cast so deep a shadow upon her delicate cheeks. “I ask you as a comrade would his equal, under similar circumstances, to be frank and open with me.”

There was no answer. The Ambassador waited dully. Besides a slight movement which might have revealed an effort at control, or only a nervous twitch which dislocated a sigh, the figure at his elbow remained motionless and dumb.

Then the Ambassador rose and confronted his wife. If his face had been sharply outlined before, it now had softened. There was nothing but profoundest sorrow in the steadfast eyes, which sought in vain to command this wilful propounder of mysteries to lift her hidden ones.

“What have I ever done that you should disobey me?” he asked.

Then she spoke. “I have not disobeyed you. You ask me to reveal what I choose to consider it wiser to con-

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ceal,—a fancy guided by my own impulse and judgment. I am not a slave to be commanded, nor a servant to be forced into unwilling submission. I am a woman who knows her own mind, who determines her own life. What is there, I demand of you in turn, so detestable in my asking Burgess a few idle questions?"

She was looking at him defiantly.

He returned her gaze without flinching. His whole soul was fainting under the consciousness that she was deceiving him.

"I am not speaking of Burgess," he said, steadily.

"Of whom, then? What folly is this?"

But her already pale face had faded to a grayish hue. One hand reached out blindly to steady itself against the door embrasure. He had stepped down from the threshold onto a stone-coping below.

"I am speaking of Mariotti," remarked the Ambassador.

He had made the statement to try her. The result was so incommensurate with his intention that he winced visibly in acute pain for her discomfiture, as she cried out, pushing him back, her hands shaking as though swept by an ague, her lips like pumice, her eyes strained and wide.

"Mariotti! What do you know of Mariotti?"

"I know enough to tremble for your record of common sense," answered the Ambassador.

His guarded speech was a mild echo of the tumult in his veins. Had she not been his wife he would have laid a commanding hand upon her shoulder then and there and forced the truth from her. But not with this trembling, cherished thing, the core of his innermost heart, the being whom he cradled in his fancy, a pearl of greatest price, this shaken, affrighted child who by this had turned away from him and had buried her burning face in her hands.

"The fact of Mariotti's existence was brought home to

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me through a member of the detective service who is in my employ," added Markoe, in a lifeless, monotonous tone. "With this discovery he also brought me news of your collusion with that clown. The disclosure was so at variance with my knowledge of my wife's sweetest dignity and modesty, I denied it in toto. I had no faith, until now, that it contained even a semblance of truth. Has my confidence been misplaced?"

"You have been correctly informed."

The answer stumbled forth haltingly. She still stood with her back to him, her face—that exquisite, haughty, incomparable face—buried in two trembling hands.

"I am to believe, then?" still dully.

"Everything."

"You are in collusion, then, with Mariotti?"

"With Mariotti."

"Apropos of Conway?"

There was a distinct pause.

A flock of crows lifted themselves with a whirl out of a meadow opposite and flew across the blue, cawing of the rain whose coming already haunted the dampening atmosphere.

The Ambassador stirred heavily. His forbidding eyes drifted from the figure which had passed him, as though striving to shield itself from his own too annihilating glance. He contemplated stolidly the meagre grass which fringed the stone coping on which he stood. It too was dying of hunger.

He moved slightly, after some moments, towards that being who now, to his keenest chagrin, did not, even when he urged it, confront him with the defiance he had learned to look upon with endurance,—a mood which he would at this painful moment have accepted with profoundest thankfulness.

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"You will not tell me of your secret?"

There was no answer. Only the delicate shoulders turned from him. Only the refractory slant of the graceful head.

He sighed.

"There is but one course to pursue,—a course I deplore, my wife,—but one which under the circumstances is but just. We must demand of Mariotti what you refuse to divulge," he said two seconds later, relentlessly.

There was utter silence.

Then, like a whirlwind, she turned. Her cheeks were scarlet. Her eyes, blazing wells of reproach and saddest confirmation of past grief.

"He will not tell you," she protested, bitterly. "Why?" in answer to her husband's look; "because he does not know. He only imagines. If you force him, if by any means you strive to expedite matters, our one hope is dead."

Markoe regarded her with puzzled eyes.

"What hope?" he demanded, instantly.

But she had checked herself. As though struggling against a recurrence of her grief she waved him off.

"I want to be alone," she said. It was a moan, strangled, impotent, pitiful. "I must be alone."

"Let us determine this first," said her husband.

She turned and looked at him.

Endurance and patience were exhausted. With pitiless, accusing eyes he stood facing her.

"I have been patient, God knows! I have overlooked your whims, your protests, your equivocations, your inexplicable absences. My forbearance is at an end. Either you tell me of this miserable secret—secret, forsooth!" furiously, with a cold, steel-like gleam in his eyes—"or I will seek out Mariotti and unearth it."

DEFIANCE

"Seek him, then," she cried almost on the instant, as though her strength were spent, her patience too exhausted. "Seek him, then, and on your head be the result."

"Kate!"

"Oh, I am tired," she sobbed, "weary, saddened through and through. You might have trusted me."

"Trusted *you*?"

"You might have known I would bring it right if I could,—if I could."

"My wife!"

But she would not see his pleading eyes nor heed his arms, which sought to hold her as she pushed past him on the step.

"Yes, your wife," she said. "Misunderstood, commanded, threatened. I, in return, defy you!"

She had turned once more. She flung her head back against the door-moulding. One foot had extended to the grassy plot against the coping.

Her hand held the knob on which it fastened to throw the door wider that she might pass out.

The two had changed places unconsciously in the increasing turmoil of their present interview.

"I may, then, attack Mariotti?"

He was looking at her strangely, fearfully, a joy-gleam welling up in his strange eyes, a wild expression of relief breaking through his sternly controlled features.

"Why not?" she threw back over her shoulder as she went out, stepping elastically across the long, uneven grass.

He watched her as she sped across the meadow, and then turned off short into a little path which skirted the edge of the dancing stream; a path which was made up of easy stages towards the château grounds.

"Mariotti," he repeated aloud then, gropingly. But

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the name conveyed in a haunting mysterious fashion another personality to him,—a young figure with Spanish eyes, of speech vivid and picturesque, two vertical lines between a pair of brows, lines which held the promise of concentrative force.

An hour later, when they met at the mid-day breakfast, at which Lamballe outdid himself in brilliant sallies, and Condorcet, who had come up from town with his host, delighted them all by reciting a verse which the Academy was acclaiming as the acme of form, the Ambassador, out of a tenderness which had remained unshaken and a trust which was absolute, determined to await Lubin's disclosure before he carried out his threatened scheme. His wife's pride was dearer to him than his own peace.

"It seems to me," said Lamballe to him that afternoon,—they were going for a drive; they were awaiting Mrs. Conway and Mrs. Markoe on the terrace, drawing on their gloves,—“I fancy I have seen that crest somewhere before.” • He was looking with puzzled intentness at a seal which swung from Markoe's watch-chain,—an intaglio set in dull gold, the inscription, an iron hand in a velvet glove. “It is oddly familiar to me.”

The Ambassador glanced down. His neutral countenance, which had aged perceptibly during the past three months, broke up.

“It's Conway's crest,” he said; “poor boy!”

ON THE TRAIL

CHAPTER XXXII

ON THE TRAIL

FOUR days later, in the Ambassador's private office, Markoe and Lamballe were discussing fresh methods of procedure, when Lubin was announced.

The pompous little man entered with a smile of barely dissimulated satisfaction, coupled with an apprehensive manner which demonstrated that secretly he acknowledged his errand to comprehend a ticklish enigma. Recently his pursuit had been obstructed by the conviction that his employer repudiated the maxim that all is fish that comes to the detective's net. This fundamental principle, which comprised foremost the Ambassador's collusion with Mariotti, had been staggered by Markoe's unexpected attitude. The Ambassador's assurance that he approved of Mrs. Markoe's quixotic support of a boulevard celebrity, sympathizing with her passion for perpetrating philanthropy even to the extent of administering it where it was undeserved, was difficult to amalgamate with Lubin's knowledge of the United States representative's habitual phlegm.

Hitherto not a screw had been permitted to remain loosely fastened in the structure which, obedient to every law of skilful mechanism, had been built up between the detective private and public force, subsequent and preceding the discriminating governorship of Lamballe, and Markoe. The affair had been conducted with accuracy, a diligence, a pertinacity which had even edified Lubin and his colleagues.

Lubin reserved his private opinion that his employer

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was as perplexed as himself at the unattended shift of events, and shielded his wife by throwing away his record of thoroughness,—a sop to the Cerberus of wounded professional vanity which his action unleashed. The detective conducted his crippled campaign with the feeling of a crab which, albeit set crawling the wrong way, still is positive that the sea cannot be far off.

Upon the Ambassador's guarded expression of inquiry, Lubin forthwith continued his peroration at the point where, a week before, he had been so peremptorily checked.

“Mariotti's means of livelihood,” he began, “are apparently inexhaustible. Soit! We determined that feature contained a mine which we would work later. Immediately upon obtaining your permission, I set to work to fathom his private life. He lives in a ramshackle building in the rue Bon Faubourg, not far from his theatre. The neighborhood is squalid, and abounds in those stenches which the poor accept as their portion. I learned from the inhabitants of the same tenement he occupied that the clown rents two rooms, which are barred off with an iron, cage-like framework, which he ordered constructed when hiring his living place; the windows are barred, also, with iron rods. I sought to obtain an entrance to his apartment, first as a tenant who wished to well examine the building before permitting himself to rent lodgings in it, and, second, as a sanitary inspector. In vain. Mariotti's two rooms are his castle: his actual whereabouts as slippery as his profession. Either he closely guards some one or something mysterious in that space; or he shields his own interests with the fury of a starving dog. He is vastly unpopular with the other inmates because of a dull, indescribable noise within his walls which the police decline to investigate; over this miscarriage of justice the neighborhood waxes eloquent and uproariously indignant upon every occasion proffered.

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The supposition is that Mariotti does not live alone ; but whether his companion is an animal or a human being is an open question. I finally succeeded in surprising a portion of his secret."

Lubin checked himself sharply, and asked Markoe if he would kindly provide a stenographer to take down his affidavit?

The Ambassador complied. In ten minutes the detective's narrative was copied by a lightning calculator of hieroglyphics, who thus nonchalantly set the seal on Mariotti's fate with a disinterestedness which was above praise.

"I spent two days shadowing the quarter, slipping from out doors into the tenement, and back again. At twilight the tenants swarmed into the streets for air and carousing. At dawn they slept, their doors and windows swung wide. I attired myself in the trousers and blouse of a working-man, patched, spotted, unobtrusive. I would creep towards that barred door of Mariotti's every time I discovered the opportunity to listen with my ear to the key-hole. I heard nothing. I had almost concluded that the inexplicable noise might be an effervescence of the neighborhood's absinthe-soaked intellect, when I learned that his fellow-tenants had not imagined it. It was only too true. I say I spent a good portion of my time with my ear at the key-hole, expectant of being annihilated momentarily if Mariotti should come upon me from the street. He is a desperate rascal, and doubtless applies desperate remedies. The quarter stinks of crime and excess. I dogged his footsteps more than once, while studying his meanderings attentively. They consisted of his sneakingly crawling to and from the theatre in time for the performances,—one in the afternoon, the other in the evening. At times he remained at the theatre day and

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night. At others, two or three times a day, he would swerve around the corner on a dog-trot, with foam at the corners of his mouth, like a hound with a fever consuming his inside. Day before yesterday I shadowed him from the street up the staircase. The hall-way is a black labyrinth of tortuous passages charged with receptacles and boxes ; the floor gray with dirt and refuse ; the stench abominable. It is almost pitch dark as one enters. The hallways, mostly closed, are but means of egress from the miserable rooms to the street. I feared each moment the clown would alter his intention ; but he was so intent upon the uppermost thought in his mind that he neglected to take his customary precaution to shut the street door. I crept through behind him. What was my surprise when he reached the top,—he was five floors up, I following so closely upon his felt-slippered heels that he might have heard my breathing,—to see him, instead of entering the two rooms which belonged to him, lay his ear to the key-hole, his own key-hole, exactly as I had done a day before, and listen, breathlessly. His face, upon which the light from a neighboring open door shone slantwise, was livid. Just now there came to our strained ears a moan, a shuddering, piteous wail, which seemed to me the ungoverned expression of some drugged animal ; a sort of strangled, feeble cry, which sounded expectant of a beating down, a cuff, or a kick. It was extraordinary the effect that sound had upon Mariotti ! Instead of shuddering mentally and physically as I was doing, hoping passionately that it would never be my lot again to surprise so acute an accent of untold misery, he drew himself up with a sigh of relief and stood rigid. The blood, which surged up slowly, put out the greenish pallor of his face. He was nibbling his finger-nails reflectively. As he stood thus the sound welled up louder ; a subdued, sombre note, a moaning that was almost human. The effect upon

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Mariotti was this time more curious than the last. He laughed ! Just a parting of his cracked lips, and a silent convulsion that shook his whole frame. He lifted his fist and shook it at the door triumphantly, or rather at the grating,—an iron one with a lock and key-hole. I saw him creep down into the street. I followed him. It was high noon. Already a crowd was assembling on the sidewalk outside the theatre. The doors were to open at half-past one o'clock."

Lamballe had been listening intently, with an expression of growing wonder and astonishment.

"Is he alluding to my erstwhile pet harlequin, the wily speculator in emotions, Mariotti?" he interrupted here, turning towards Markoe.

The Ambassador nodded.

"Tiens," vouchsafed Lamballe. "They are, then, one and the same? The rascal is enjoying a period of remarkable prosperity, I read."

"Prosperity," confirmed Lubin, ironically. "In my opinion, for rascality, pressed down and running over, recommend me Mariotti. The clown has attained a perfection in villany which is only matched by the variegated vices he steals from others with which to adorn himself."

"Mariotti," mused Lamballe aloud, as though the name called up memories charged with merriment not un-mixed with awe; he flung his head back against the fauteuil in which he reclined; he brought the forefingers of his long, blue-veined hands together into a point; he dreamily contemplated a shadow which swelled and diminished against the ceiling,—the shadow of a swinging blind with shuttered bars of light. "A scoundrel who for inventiveness would outwit the devil himself. In our last mutual folly his avarice predominated to such an extent that I have since entirely renounced the pleasure of listen-

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ing to his double-edged translation of men and things. Know him? Why, he has a veritable *flair* for intrigue. 'Twas he who let me in for that affair at the Duchesse's."

"What affair?" The voice was the Ambassador's.

Lamballe glanced at him in surprise.

"It is not possible," he ejaculated, "that your praiseworthy devotion to official duties precluded you from hearing of the main event of the Duchesse de Launoy's ball last June, the evening of the tenth?"

"I did not attend it."

In a concise, brilliant fashion, Lamballe pictured the event.

"We left no portion of our plan unstudied," he asserted. "It never occurred to me, until too late, that Mariotti's vanity might get the better of his ingenuity. We had agreed that he should go in at twelve o'clock to exercise all his talent performing odd pranks; I was to arrive later, supposedly Mariotti himself,—after he had left, with the maskers reaching out vainly for him. The intrigue was double-sided with opportunity. Imagine my chagrin when, upon my appearance at the foot of the grand staircase, my eyes—it seemed almost an optical delusion—encompassed the fact of my double audaciously awaiting me at the landing above! I realized then and there that the intrigue had lost its savor. It was being played for the clown, not for me. Now that Mariotti's vanity had predominated, my subterfuge was devoid of its principal ingredient,—the enigma was solved then and there, and our plot revealed. I managed to hide my chagrin in the Duchesse's presence; but the next morning I confronted the rascal who had thus defied me. I found Mariotti in a state bordering on frenzy. He swore that the night in question he had explicitly obeyed orders. That he quitted the Duchesse's at midnight, after having reduced the throng to crying for him

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like a child for the moon. He claimed that the other Mariotti was an unknown person, a rival, perhaps, who had sought to undermine my confidence in this one of my well-recognized protégés. Of course, the fellow lied."

"He has as many lives as a cat, and has mastered as many falsehoods as would equip Cupid's quiver," swore Lubin, violently. "His last act would be to tell the truth, but only if some nefarious project might be advanced by it."

"He broke his contract," continued Lamballe, contemptuously, "after having obtained from me an exorbitant sum which he swore was the price of his silence. He ordered a copy of his own costume made for me, and demanded a fabulous sum for his services in my behalf,—which I paid without demurring. The principal feature of the evening fell flat because of his duplicity. He lost my patronage. He will find it difficult to replace it. I had made a study of that clown. I consider him an honest avower of the iniquity most men elect to deny. I have had many a laugh over his frank expression of ungodliness. Bland confession of wickedness comes to him as naturally as the blush to a maiden's cheek. It never occurred to him to lie, as regarded his admiration of his rank unworth. It was a revelation. I cannot picture him prosperous. He stole with unadulterated cunning, but he always disclosed his hand. He abhorred anything systematic; even vice. He is too erratic to be anything but irresponsible."

The Ambassador had been an absorbed listener to Lamballe's black and white sketch, which was delivered crisply, and in his customary trenchant style. Mariotti was slowly attaining the dignity of a dashing operator in his calculation. Secretly he nurtured a dread which was rolling up thicker and faster hourly. What possible contingency had set agog so illicit a communion as the trapèze performer's and his wife's?

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As he rolled this inquiry under his mental palate, he looked up, and caught the reflection of a curious gleam in Lubin's narrow, cunning eyes. He became furiously aware that the detective was making the same mental calculation as himself.

"We are waiting for a new chapter in your story, Lubin," he remarked with unction. "Your next move, no doubt, will be to effect an entrance into that den of iniquity which you surprised day before yesterday?" There was an underlying irony in his tone. The Latin love of a dramatic situation had been evident to him all through this interview. He was prepared to subtract from it the odor of villany and metaphor, and, when alone, straighten the main plan into proportion. Facts were what he wanted ; not sensationalism.

Lubin had been standing, leaning most of his weight heavily on one foot. He now changed his attitude, as though preparing to expostulate. He regarded his interlocutor with a contemplative air, which seemed foreign to his manner of pompous authority.

"I have made that move," he finally managed to ejaculate with difficulty. He evidently dreaded arousing his employer's cool refutation of his own paramount conviction. His eyelids fell. As they did so, and his lips moved, preparatory to continuing, there came a galvanic shock over his body, which vanished as suddenly, and left him standing levelly on his two feet, with glittering orbs confronting the Ambassador. The shock had come as Lubin's eyes fell on Conway's seal, which swung to and fro upon the Ambassador's watch-chain as he had turned to urge the detective to pursue his narrative.

The Ambassador's eyes followed Lubin's after that first involuntary start. "What did you discover?" he inquired, blandly. He lifted the trinket idly between his thumb and

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forefinger and deliberately fondled it, as he mentally registered the detective's visible emotion.

"That seal!" cried Lubin, sharply, spontaneously. "Dieu des Dieux, monsieur l'Ambassadeur, d'où l'avez-vous obtenu?"

"It's Conway's. How does that concern you?"

The detective for one brief instant seemed to lose his breath. His countenance recorded five changes in a second. Apprehension, consternation, confusion, relief, and, finally, determination.

"If that seal is Monsieur Conway's for sure, sir, there's no time to be lost," he finally managed to let forth in a hoarse whisper.



CHAPTER XXXIII

CLOSING IN

"WHAT do you mean?"

"Soyez raisonnable, professeur," interpolated Lamballe, ironically.

Both he and the Ambassador had risen and approached the little detective with blanched faces.

"I won't take long, sir," vouchsafed Lubin, after a pause, in which he had fallen heavily into a chair and asked for a glass of water. The three had changed places. He was master now; the two distinguished parties, to the commanding attitude he had assumed, his willing slaves. The detective's limbs were trembling under him. His smug countenance gradually, as his parched lips let forth their story, acquired a look of pity and vengeance combined which was almost ludicrous.

"Those dumb cries haunted me for one whole night,—a

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night in which my spirit seemed floating in a vortex of beating, and bleating piteous appeals for help. I was in a place made up of a space in which humans and animals were warring pitilessly with one another. I could hear the dull sickening thud of the falling blows; the strangled whinings of the victims of brute cruelty. I thought I had gone mad when I awoke, and the thing still pervaded my cringing thoughts. I made for Mariotti's dingy quarters like a mouse for its hole. I had determined to unearth that mystery, if I died in the attempt. The neighborhood was deserted that day, happily. I crawled up the stairs, and through the skylight on to the roof unmolested. I had made up my mind to enter through the window. I entered, squeezing my body through the apertures, of which there were two, set wide apart. The stench in the room was foul,—so foul I caught my breath.

"On the bed there was a pile of dirty sheets, which at first I thought served to cover the squalid frame. But now, as I looked steadily, it disclosed the outlines of a human form. Sickeningly I became conscious that I was contemplating the body of a man. The form was rigid; the eyes were half open."

Lubin checked himself, and looked straight at the Ambassador. Markoe swallowed something which obstructed his breathing apparatus, and made a sign for him to continue. His features were gradually becoming impregnated with the same stamp of fought-against conviction which the detective's countenance so frankly revealed.

Lamballe burst forth in a hushed, broken voice, "*Mais dépêchez donc, mon ami. Qu'est-ce que vous voulez dire?*"

"The figure as I crept up to it was so emaciated; a mass of skin and bone; dead, I thought. Oh, the poor, helpless hands and the sunken cheeks and the unkempt hair! It lay quite still."

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There was a dull silence. Lubin's voice, breaking through it a moment later, made them all start.

"I moved away, after looking about me fearfully and taking note of every feature of the room. Before the door stood a heavy chest of drawers. Mariotti was evidently accustomed to making his egress through the door of an adjoining room. If the body on the bed were his victim, the creature who gave vent to those horrible dumb cries, the wall evidently dulled them to that tenement's occupants, but not to the people in the neighboring house. . . . There is a feature of my story which I considered of small importance up to a few moments since, but which I now propose to relate."

Lamballe stood behind the Ambassador by this time, his eyes intently fastened on his sternly-controlled face. His own was unreadable ; but as the story unfolded, one of his fine, blue-veined hands crept almost involuntarily from the back of the Ambassador's fauteuil to his shoulder and rested there. It almost seemed as if he wished to forestall pressing him back into his seat did he make too impetuous a move towards rising.

"As I had stood skulking almost in Mariotti's pocket, the day I had surprised him listening and grinning over his victim's moans, his hand, an olive-colored thing, the hand of an artist rather than that of a workman, but still with broken finger-nails and callous spots along the palms, stretched out to steady him as he leaned forward and grasped the railing. I was crouched down so near it, to keep out of his sight, that I could have bitten it. On the little finger of that hand was a ring, an intaglio set in dullest gold. The insignia was the same as you carry there, monsieur, on your watch-chain ; an iron hand in a velvet glove."

Lamballe started forward. "That is where I have seen it," he cried, excitedly ; "on Mariotti !"

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The three stood regarding one another in dismay, not unmixed with a slowly growing horror.

"It must have been with Mariotti all the time to have offered us a complete unravelling of this mystery. On his head be the result," vouchsafed Lamballe, after about two minutes had passed, in which they all read the possible solution to Conway's disappearance, shudderingly.

Markoe steadied one palm against the clawed arm of his fauteuil until the white skin looked like a drum-head across its frame.

"Continue," he said, dully. He held the seal again between his fingers, this time tenderly. He heard a glad, eager young voice saying,—

"Stephen, you have offered me the biggest thing you know of. I mean to obey your orders as grandly as the strength may be given me. It is the opportunity of my life!" How could he reconcile this version of his ardent young apostle with his wife's defiance, and her secret collusion with Mariotti? The more he thought, the stronger was his sense of dignity outraged.

"Before I left the room," continued Lubin, fearfully, "I tiptoed once more towards the figure on the bed. Its eyes, filmed like the eyes of a dead fish, were half open; the lids were arrested by the action of some powerful drug. I bent and listened to his heart. It was beating faintly. The hair was black, so were the eyes. The limbs were clad in a pair of muddy boots; the mud looked half a year old. I had no clue to his identity; but I was none the less convinced that here was foul play. Now, knowing what I know," with deadly import, "there is but one conclusion to draw. Mariotti's dupe, the creature who wails night and day, the victim of the clown's diabolical treatment, is none other than——"

"Than?"

CLOSING IN

"The man we seek. Conway."

The Ambassador's hand relaxed its hold of the arm of his fauteuil. His lids lifted. From under them the steel orbs looked out neutrally. Lamballe, after a loud ejaculation, turned his back and walked towards the window. The stenographer's pen flew across the page before him with a scraping, monotonous sound which set all their nerves on edge.

"And we sit here like cowards while even now that scoundrel may be brutalizing his victim with blows, or even worse," finally broke out the Ambassador's voice, vibrantly.

"Doucement, doucement," protested Lubin. "It is only by this that we have recognized the part we must play. In France the villain could turn on us, and clap us into prison, if by one slip we proved ourselves his slaves instead of his masters. We must arrest him for the confiscation of stolen goods. Thus the affair will be kept within bounds. Monsieur l'Ambassadeur—should we loudly accuse—might bring about him that very harvest of scandal which all along he has cautioned me to avoid. Once Mariotti is in our hands, we will turn on the screws. Not before."

Markoe all at once became curiously conscious of a novel sensation. He felt as though he were stretched on a rack, being steadily dismembered. He made a sign to his secretary. He rose and left the room. Then he turned towards Lamballe with his familiar inscrutable expression.

His face was a trifle paler than usual, which, considering that in the past few seconds he had determined to give rein to a search which might forever defeat his soul's happiness, was not unnatural.

Lubin grinned expectantly. "Have I your permission to command two of our picked officers in citizen's clothes?"

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he said, addressing Lamballe. "We might find it feasible to call at Mariotti's house after we have arrested him, pour prendre une tasse de thé!"

Lamballe acquiesced.

"There is no time to be lost," muttered Lubin, earnestly, as he lifted his hat to go, after inclining profoundly. "If that poor creature in the bed is alive to-day, it is because Providence is on our side instead of Mariotti's!"

Making a reverent gesture, as he inserted this wedge, with an air of profoundest religious fervor,—a gesture which disclosed that peculiar hirsute arrangement, with its urchin profile and its saint-like back, in Lubin's salute to a Higher Power,—the brave little man triumphantly withdrew.

Events after all were moving his way, and the screw was turning in the Ambassador's superficial doctrine.



CHAPTER XXXIV

AT THE THÉÂTRE MARIOTTI

Two men applied for a loge, situated as closely as possible to the foot-lights, at the ticket-office of a flourishing theatre, rejoicing under the management of a famous star, at two o'clock the same afternoon. Obtaining this, they entered quietly, keeping in the back of the loge, and became masters of the situation. Their seats overlooked every particular of the clown's make-up, his attitudes, and his facial contortions. One of them was a beardless, imperturbable looking individual, attired in a pepper-and-salt business suit. The other was a Parisian of distinction. The two simultaneously fastened their attention upon Mariotti.

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The clown was in his element. Like a fish to water, he took to the sensation of warm appreciation which mounted like incense towards his inflated soul. A war-horse sniffing gunpowder might have no less strained every muscle towards responding to the tightened bit than did this frankly ardent child of nature under the delighted eyes and smiles of his worshippers. Hitherto comedy had been his sphere, but a singular coincidence to-day brought tragedy in his way, and he rose to it with the facile impudence of a many-sided soul which seeks, in Divine law as well as human, gratuitous sustenance.

A woman was seated in a conspicuous seat in the second tier, with a wide, congested face surmounting a huge rolling body. Mère Richard was a familiar figure in the neighborhood. She was the proprietress of a fish-stand on the boulevard extérieur. Her libations had been so manifold that the rich blood of her youth had mulled into a purplish declaration of ignoble abuse.

The day was warm, the atmosphere vitiated. Mère Richard had breakfasted with kindred souls. She was topping off her repast with a visit to her favorite theatre, to witness the triumphs of her old favorite, Mariotti. Her loud guffaws, in response to the clown's side-splitting sallies, had turned the highly elated attention of the alert audience in her direction more than once. She seemed radiantly alive to the proud honor of knowing a man who had brought the world to his feet. Her eyes were blood-shot; her ragged, unkempt hair was dishevelled. She leaned heavily forward. Between her gasps of approval and her extravagant bursts of applause, she could be heard all over the lower part of the house, breathing stertorously.

Mariotti had been exhibiting a fantastic version of gayety. Song had succeeded dance; and gymnastic proficiency had been followed by audacity. He stood now, his right limb

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unhipped from the knee up, the toe pointed downward, as he recited a vicious monologue, which for long had been the delight of the boulevards. His wicked eyes roved with a look of conscious power over the uplifted faces of his rapt audience. His words tumbled forth in a picturesque harangue,—a medley of philosophy and cynicism. He was strung to the highest pitch of vainglory, when Mère Richard suddenly gave vent to a hollow, hoarse shriek, half groan, half sigh, and fell forward against the railing of her loge.

In an instant all was confusion. The woman had been stricken with apoplexy.

The spectators had been cheering unstintedly, exchanging nudges and asides, when the sound of that awful shriek and the falling of a ponderous body put out their mirth.

Mariotti stopped short. His right limb uncurled from his left, where it had twisted into a curious corkscrew shape, the toe pointed downwards to index his song's purport. He glanced involuntarily, with a perceptible whitening of the rims of his ears,—the rest of his face was painted grotesquely,—towards that portion of the theatre from which the ominous sound had proceeded. He saw Mère Richard doubled forward, her head wedged between the railing and the fauteuil, her face purple, her eyes, haunting, congested balls of gleaming membrane—dead !

With a shudder the clown doffed his trained mood like an old garment. His olive-hued hands clawed out a protest, spasmodically. He leaped to a corner of the stage, after one ghoulis moment in which the dead and the living eyes had confronted one another silently,—that watchful, frightened audience between,—and placed a finger on an electric button still looking back over his shoulder, as though spell-bound, at those fixed, strange orbs with their

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horrible stare which seemed to see something far beyond him. With a mighty effort he withdrew his own, and followed their gaze. Destiny ! What had those eyes told him of warning ? He seemed, too, clutched in an awful thralldom. He had read a plain story of the future which awaits all mankind.

Furiously he shook off this unbidden message with a maddened expression of abject terror. Twisting towards the footlights, his back well set against that silent spectator, who, once so merry, refused now to laugh or applaud, or even acknowledge him, he strung his nerves up to making from the shadow of death a means of grace. His eyes moistened with what his admirers described later as genuine grief.

"Mes amis," he whispered gently, in broken-hearted tones, as though taking tenderly that eagerly responsive throng into the holy of holies of his distracted peace, "Mère Richard is no more. There is a woman who has played no small part in her day. She mothered many a gamin who, without her help, would have sunk into ignominy, instead of rising, as I have done," with a smirk of satisfaction, "to the pinnacle of cosmopolitan glory. Fame, she ever preached to me, its chosen apostle, is the golden apple which swings in sight of true genius. I weep for the going out of so actual a philosopher as this fish-wife, who has died happy witnessing the edifying spectacle of an old friend at the apex of recognition."

And verily, as the great coarse body of the deceased woman was lifted and borne away by two stalwart individuals from the Théâtre Mariotti to the Morgue, Mariotti, for the first time in public, seemed to weep. "In the midst of life we are—uncertain !" sobbed he, in a choked voice, his shoulders shaking hysterically, his handkerchief carried, in a perfect imitation of unmitigated woe, to his

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sly eyes,—orbs which were hinting daringly and delightedly, even now, the consciousness that his last escapade was his best. Tragedy had, too, its property value he was learning in this terrible half hour in which his nerves seemed to have almost gotten beyond his control, and his very vitals had shrunk back appalled at a truth his forced sophistry might not gainsay.

After five minutes, in which his childlike expression of resigned sorrow had brought him nearer to the hearts of his audience than all the music and the gayety of his hitherto fantastic repertoire, Mariotti reverted to his former mood. In the twinkling of an eye, death, the inevitable, was forgotten, and life, après Mariotti, was reborn. He left no personage unattacked in his barefaced irreverence. Either the tragedy recently enacted had fired his genius anew, or it had provided a novel outlet to his already seething fancy. With his right hand gracefully laid across his hip, his left drawing curious imaginary circles in the air, he stood, nonchalantly reeling off a vivid account of the past week's doings, typical and topical, which for inventive faculty was bewildering as well as just.

Thus, inwardly delighted at this, a new evidence of unparalleled power, he ceased casting those restless glances across his shoulder, from which in the past dread seconds he had found it almost impossible to rid himself.

He did not see three figures glide on to the stage behind him from the wings, one of them a small, unctuous personage with a modest smile and downcast eyes, the back of a sanctimonious prelate, and the profile of an urchin.

The three newcomers crept up close behind him and stood motionless. It was a curious spectacle. The Gascon, in his fantastic costume, gracefully emphasizing his humorous remarks with gestures as swift and mercurial as his moods. The three figures, like bronze statues, eloquently silent.

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A voice speaks from the depths of a hitherto apparently unoccupied loge to the left of the footlights, close to the stage. It is a ringing organ, charged with an underlying note of command which is peculiarly striking. It fastens the attention of that responsive audience.

As it salutes the air metallically, Mariotti becomes rigid.

"Mariotti, king of experts and prince of good things, tell us, thy slaves, the purport of that circlet which binds the first finger of thy right hand? Thou preachest the maxim of eternal mirth. It is but meet that thou shouldst as much reveal the secret of the amulet thou sportest so openly. Tell us the meaning of your badge of beauty?"

The clown turned ashen. He shook like an aspen leaf. Fumblingly he sought to tear the ring off his shaking hand; but, either through awkwardness or because the joints of his finger had swelled since he had donned it, the mark of his thieving precepts refused to renounce its place. He gazed about him wildly in search of means of egress as the mocking tones continued, but an officer in citizen's clothes stood at the back of the stage nonchalantly, and another blocked the sortie at the left wing, and yet another at the right. Mariotti's defiant muscles dwindled. The rogue knew this portion of his programme was not of his instigation.

But his audience, attuned to surprises, wildly applauded the authoritative voice which, with unflinching resolve, carried its message straight home.

"Thou wilt not? Oh, unwary Mariotti! Oh, clown! Oh, unjust expounder of a gayety thou thyself, at the first touch of gloom, renoucest! What knowest thou *now* that we may not know? What secret concealest thou that other men may not, too, believe? Art thou made of fire and brimstone, instead of flesh and blood, that thou darest

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thus defy? Fie, Mariotti! We know thy blood to be the blood of kings, thy flesh the rosy, palpitating flesh of the world's spoiled child, thy spirit the noble spirit which commands allegiance from the highest to the lowest. Disclose, then, thy true identity. We would know you through and through. Thou exposest day by day a new side of thy character. Tell us, then, in this hour, of those adornments which decorate thy beautiful body. The ring. Tell us of the ring."

Then the clown, with a wild glare, a forebend of almost delirious dread, flung out his fantastic story of the hollow theory upon which his fame was strung.

"The ring proclaims my destiny—to rule," he cried.

He was interrupted by the caterwaulings of the delighted spectators.

"See you the iron hand in the velvet glove," he screamed, shaking the finger with its shining circlet furiously at the direction from which the voice came. "The emblem is my emblem. I, Mariotti, the clown, have thus my foot upon the world's neck; that world to which lesser men cringe, by force of which smaller men swerve from the beaten track of achievement. I play my own scale up the fructifying gamut of my days. I attune all joy to one key. That key is Mariotti."

But the unseen voice interrupted him.

"Why not the iron hand alone?" it questioned ironically. "The velvet glove is worn but to conceal thy true purpose,—to dismay. The disguise of a coward, forsooth, which clothes itself in a thin disguise instead of stripping itself nude to let its muscles play their part unhampered. That ring is not thine own, oh, great and glorious clown, or thou hadst had a better answer ready. Whose, then, is it?"

Mariotti's features were by this undergoing a twitching

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which looked as though set in motion by an electric battery.

"Loose it, clown," mocked the hidden voice.

"Who art thou?" cried Mariotti.

"I am myself. Thou canst not say as much."

It was an accusation. The sinning soul which could have stood before that multitude and declared itself not guilty must have had nerves of iron and muscles of steel. Mariotti, in the past hour, during his unwilling encounter with death, had lost his feverish grip.

The three officers here came forward from up the stage to the footlights, and stood guard over the stage hero.

The audience was elate with manifest delight. This, no doubt, was a novelty dished up in original fashion, their afternoon's special treat. It bore the hall-mark. There was the dash and dare-devilry in it which signified Mariotti.

"The day is done," chanted the hidden voice, sombrely.

"Night comes to Mariotti."

Two hands were laid upon the clown's shoulders. He felt the stinging sensation of cold iron against his flesh. Slowly the curtain fell.

The astonished spectators pushed their way into the street. Their mirth, a forced thing at best, rank with insatiate desire for ribaldry, died hard in their strained throats. They felt dimly as though they had been confronted with a charnelhouse instead of their promised meed of illimitable glee. They pushed and jostled one another, expostulating.

"A clown who scoffs at his world, indeed," cried one.

"Where were he, ask I, without that same world? Carrion!"

"His footstool," sneered another. If the world is Mariotti's footstool, who, then, is Mariotti?"

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"The seal of death is on that playhouse," muttered the butcher, crossing himself fearfully, and bidding his wife and children do likewise.



CHAPTER XXXV

FOUND

BEHIND the footlights and the drop-curtain, with its green dog running alongside a pink river, an officer stood grimly superintending the annihilation of a depraved individual who had whetted and glutted a short, sweet fame. A minion of the law firmly fastened a pair of handcuffs about two olive-skinned wrists, which squirmed vainly in their frantic efforts to be free. Another struggled fiercely with a curling serpentine form which was gliding along the ground, striving to effect a wriggling escape from the coils of a stout rope which was being bound fast to ankles and waist.

Lubin reflectively turned Conway's ring over and over with a look of intense enjoyment. He had drawn it, after one bold struggle, from the clown's finger.

"I arrest you," said he, solemnly, in response to the whining cries for mercy, the screaming threats of revenge, the curses horrible and augmenting with which the fetid air seemed charged, "in the name of the French Republic, for the confiscation of stolen goods."

All the answer he received was another foul-mouthed prayer for mercy from the dethroned idol at his feet. His broken teeth bit the dust. The gods of merriment, which the famous harlequin had worshipped for weeks as his special fetich, had deserted their most faithful acolyte in his direst need.

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"Our accomplished friend will accompany us to his home, perhaps?" suggested Lubin, with an I-told-you-so grin towards a couple of officers who now joined them. "I have orders to instigate a search for stolen goods in his apartment."

At this the miserable scoundrel on the ground gave vent to a shrill shriek. He swore that for poverty, for simplicity, for emptiness, his living place represented the ideal shanty of the wanderer and the indigent.

"Be silent, Mariotti," cried Lamballe, finally, laying his hand on the squirming rascal's shoulder with a look of pity. "The law which you have so long defied must be obeyed."

And now ensued a scene which, for moral contrariety, defies description.

The clown manifested himself ready to comply with his oppressor's wish. The little company started forth, Mariotti piteously beseeching that he be led through the more obscure by-ways, instead of onto the boulevards, where his downfall would be immediately snatched up as food by the loafers who fed upon like discomfiture as their natural prey. In compliance with this, Lubin evinced an ignorance, concerning the tortuous alley-ways which gave onto the modern forum, which was highly instructive, and revealed the cunning of a master hand. He had dealt with pitch too long not to have become in a measure defiled. He, it was evident, proposed to extract his own revenge then and there from the victim of his skill. The great Lubin, who knew Paris as well and better than the urchin who grows, a ragged flower, fed at its markets, lost his way. To him and him alone could be attributed the grim irony of more than once falling upon the main highway, clutching a pallid, affrighted thing by the wrists and shoulders, with rolling eyes and foaming lips, and curses

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breathed in many tongues, who looked upon the crowd that gathered with delighted faces with the turbid, fearful gaze of a maddened soul in torment. The mob grew apace. It finally followed the clown to his tenement, scoffing at his pitiful attempts to be released.

Twice, when Mariotti strove to break through the ranks, a friendly hand might have aided him,—the multitude was increasing minute by minute. A clear head, a light pair of heels, and he could have still escaped by force of the slipperiness of his methods, which were ever unanticipated ; but the tide had turned. A new idol had already come their way, a novelty, whereas the charlatan's notoriety was already half a year old.

Mariotti's reverse was now flying from lip to lip. His collapse was indubitable. Two masons joined the ranks who shook their fists at him, and demanded loudly their pay. Some haggard women glided from an alley, where they had been waiting to waylay the clown, and told their piteous story of his cruelty in denying them their wages, as he passed.

He finally brought up, the howling urchins at his heels, the masons vowing vengeance, the women lending their hoarse, unsexed voices to the general pandemonium, before the tenement where unkempt females nursed their progeny on the sidewalks whose gutters were gorged with rotten fruit and loose paper ends. Gnome-built men, with bleary eyes, slunk to and fro with empty beer-bottles clutched in their dingy fists.

Lubin halted. His cunning eyes at a glance foresaw that the crowd's attention must be diverted. He gave an order to one of his aids in a low voice and disappeared.

The officer turned and promised the mob, if it would be patient, a view of Mariotti as he was led to prison. It

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stood sullenly awaiting its time to add its mite to this melancholy spectacle, when the time came for its famous idol's crowning disgrace.

Lamballe and Markoe had walked from the theatre, and by this had climbed the stairs of the tenement.

Mariotti's barred door was locked. With the help of a neighboring locksmith they entered.

Mariotti was dragged, shrieking horribly, up the five flights, and pitched like a sack of merchandise into the middle of the foul room.

The window—its thick iron bars let in but dimly the sunlight—was flung wide.

On the bed lay stretched a motionless thing, which the three men approached, with bated breath, on tiptoe.

Lamballe bent over it pitifully, motioning Markoe to keep back. Swiftly, with a great start which he strove vainly to control, he reached forward, and dragged the covering off the rigid young body that lay there.

There had been no mistake. The Spanish eyes, filmed still, shone large and full. The strong young figure stretched motionless.

It was Conway ; but so emaciated, so hollow-cheeked, the heavy lids half open, the faint breath coming at uneven intervals between the parted teeth, his own mother had hardly recognized him.

They forced some brandy between the teeth, and piled pillows beneath his head. The temples were so hollow that one could have laid one's fist in them. They pulled the relaxed head forward ; it had fallen back, the jaws almost unlocked. There came, after a little, a dull murmur through the cracked lips.

His hands, those strong young hands which Markoe remembered as so perfectly cared for, and shapely, hung limp. The nails looked as though they had been growing

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for a month. The body, though rigid, seemed on the eve of utter collapse. So fearful were the awe-stricken watchers of altogether checking the heart's action, they could only stand in guarded inertia around the bed, while Lamballe withdrew to despatch a messenger for a physician.

Mariotti crouched on the floor, groaning and whining. He had reached out one long, sinuous hand, and had grasped a broken beer-bottle, with a furious look of maddened rage towards his captors, which for unmitigated venom made them shudder. He now sat heaped up in the darkest corner of the room, his knees huddled to his chin, chattering like a monkey in broken indistinguishable sentences.

The physician arrived and cleared the room at once. Only Markoe was left standing at the bedside as he made his examination.

The sheets were foul with vermin.

He turned with a short sigh finally, and asked Markoe if he were related to the patient.

Upon Markoe's silent acquiescence he hesitated.

"I cannot say," he began, in an authoritative manner, "exactly when we may expect the worst, but I have no doubt it must come. Your friend has been subjected to a slow course of starvation for weeks. This alone he might have withstood,—he evidently was possessed of a magnificent constitution,—but with it he has been the victim of a course of poisoning which is nothing less than demoniacal. He has consumed arsenic enough to kill three men, and has been fed on morphine and cocaine to dull his faculties. If he by any chance should recover, his reasoning powers will be forever shattered."

Markoe stood silent. If in his heart he vowed vengeance not a muscle of his impenetrable face betrayed the fact.



"THE QUICKER HE IS REMOVED THE BETTER"

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The physician made a deprecating gesture.

"He seems a fine young fellow," he said.

"He was a fine young fellow," vouchsafed the Ambassador. Unconsciously he had made use of the past tense instead of the present indicative. It seemed to register an infidelity to the poor lad who, so pitifully, lay there, a victim of circumstances.

"The quicker he is removed the better. He must have food, light, air, cleanliness, but I cannot extend you any hope. The poisons employed were deadly, inasmuch as they serve to dry up the blood in the brain. The cells, thus starved of their requisite food, dwindle, and, if left too long, reject sustenance when proffered them. The mind will be irretrievably dwarfed if the patient lives, which is doubtful."

The physician took up his hat, after having extricated a small phial from his pocket, a few drops from which he forced between Conway's clinched teeth. At the Ambassador's request, after having named the amount of his fee, which was handed him, he withdrew.

Markoe crossed the room to the chattering thing in the corner. His soul sickened under the slow, sure comprehension of what Conway must have suffered, in durance vile, pending the twelve miserable weeks which he had spent being tortured to death, impotent to acquire either faculty or aid.

"Tell me, you fiend incarnate," he muttered, touching the wriggling rascal on the floor with the toe of his boot,—he heard Lubin giving instructions to procure a litter, consequent upon the doctor's order,—"what unseen power threw that innocent individual into your cruel hands?"

But Mariotti still twisted convulsively, and rolled his eyes toward the ceiling, muttering Ave Maria, and invoking the powers of hell to slay his tormentors.

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Markoe drew a small, steel-barrelled instrument from his hip pocket, and pointed it deliberately at the figure groveling on the floor. It gave vent to a shrill shriek, and strove to beat him off with shaking hands.

"We'll have you up before the Juge de la Paix before you are an hour older, you cur," he muttered, in deadly tones, "but I propose to have some things out with you myself. Speak, or I won't answer for my acts!"

"He stole from me," screamed Mariotti; "he robbed me of my clothes. 'Twas he," he muttered, with a hideous imprecation, "who turned from me my noblest patron."

"Your noblest patron's name?" demanded the Ambassador, imperatively, still with that fierce, stirred look in his customarily imperturbable countenance.

"Lamballe."

"Lie upon lie, you bundle of iniquity," returned Lamballe, after disposing the rigid, emaciated body of Conway upon the litter brought for the purpose. He approached Mariotti with two police officers, who roughly dragged him to his feet, shuddering and whimpering. "Conway had no more to do with me than I with him. What would you insinuate?"

The clown cursed hotly, with a look of cunning which defied still his captors. He might be on the verge of a revelation which would guillotine him; all the more he thirsted for revenge.

"I go to prison," he said. "Soit! But still I hold a secret in this brain," striking his forehead harshly, leaving in the violent process a dull, purplish mark against the soiled skin, "for which I ask my price."

"We will find means to extract that secret from you," grimly returned the individual with the steel-barrelled in-

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strument, which, by now, he had slipped back into place over his hip pocket.

Mariotti faced the brave eyes with an oblique expression in his long, narrow ones. "If it had not been for her," he cried, dramatically, with a leer, "I had not known the value of yonder pimping idiot," pointing to the motionless body of Conway, which was now being conveyed from the room.

The rogue was satisfied.

He saw a look of unpremeditated repugnance flash across the countenance of the United States representative. It came and vanished in a trice ; but Mariotti knew his random shot had struck home.

With a shrug he stopped struggling, gave himself up, and the two officers drew him across the threshold. As he vanished, he glanced across his shoulder at the figure of the neutral-expressed man who from the first had implanted in the rogue's seething breast a desire to sting and wound. He felt an innate distaste for inanimate flesh.

He had thrown his dart with unfaltering skill. No one knew better than this student of other men's foibles that to be tortured by a doubt is to travel the pace that kills.

That doubt was the Ambassador's.

The scoundrel let forth three words as he left the room. Lubin, who stood aside, mockingly salaaming to let him pass,—the litter with its piteous burden was ahead,—heard it. So did Lamballe, as he picked up his hat from the floor where it had fallen, as he stooped low over the miserable cot. So did the man who was attacked by it in his profoundest part,—his self-respect.

"Cherchez la femme," hissed Mariotti.

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CHAPTER XXXVI

BETWEEN DARK AND DAYLIGHT

THE low-lived insinuation left a bruise, in spite of the fact that its victim's make-up was attuned to so lofty a key that in any less painful hour Mariotti's wicked attempt to discomfit his powerful adversary would have passed by him almost unnoticed. Almost, had it concerned himself alone ; but it did not concern himself alone. It related to the sacredest hidden chamber of his shaken faith.

The Ambassador, with a quick flush which seared his impenetrable face like a burn, drew one imperceptible sigh, and stood still, as though stabbed to the heart.

Lamballe stopped a moment, alert, on the threshold. He looked over his shoulder at the quiet, unassuming figure. His trained gift of sentiment dared what a colder nature's sense of delicacy might have precluded. His gaze had construed, with an acknowledgment of acute sympathy, the expression of aversion which, for a second, made Markoe's countenance alive and vivid. One hand had been raised to adjust his hat. At the same time it hid the furrowed lines in his scowling forehead.

The Parisian's eyes confronted a pair of grey ones, which at this moment more than ever, in their palpable endeavor to express nothing, were colorless. Lamballe's were brilliant black orbs containing a crosswise glint criticized by his enemies as sharp as a knife, and as cruel ; by his friends, wells of luminous benevolence. That crosswise gleam seemed to broaden at this moment. It extended its effulgence across his kind face.

"The scoundrel's rôle is played through," he remarked,

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lightly ; had Markoe taken pains to study his tone he would have perceived it singularly devoid of the sympathy which was the root of its expression. The Parisian knew that in moments of intense suffering hidden anguish is increased fourfold if it be alluded to by a tactless outsider who voices what is considered by the sufferer as unutterable. Markoe remembered once, long after, that Lamballe's voice had, at this hour of unpremeditated mental confusion, sounded like a chime of silver bells.

"I can see it all," cried Lamballe, bringing his lids closely together, as though at the moment instituting a microscopic investigation of a seemingly insignificant item.

"All what?" The voice was spent.

"Mariotti's little game." He paused, and smiled slowly here ; the clown's piercing shrieks could be heard mounting the stairs, down which he was so mercilessly being dragged to his doom, begging for pity. "One would think that rascal recognized Paris detective methods too well to attempt blackmail."

"Blackmail !"

Lamballe stooped. With no perceptible call for committing so unnecessary a piece of disinterested orderliness, he lifted a broken bottle from the floor and placed it upon a neighboring shelf. As he performed this office, he naturally turned his back upon the Ambassador. He thus escaped the knowledge that his listener's face underwent a marked change of expression. Was it relief or bewilderment ?

"Clear," continued the Frenchman, colloquially, "as the nose on my face, and that," laughingly, "is clear as day. Mariotti by some mysterious means has secured Madame Markoe's trust. Oh !" at the Ambassador's involuntary movement of surprise, "I, too, have perceived the kind lady's absorption. I have seen her emotion and

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uncontrollable anxiety. How could I help it, since we are friends? But if she, from some exalted sense which we beings of a coarser organism may not conjecture, has chosen to keep her secret to herself, how infamous will be her punishment."

"What punishment?"

"You cannot foresee? Why, the very fact of her collusion with Mariotti is the key to the scoundrel's slow, insidious method of torture. He has promised to bring your friend to her. She, trusting him, believed the clown to have this in his power. He, perceiving her innocence, has played upon it, and demanded extortionate sums while bidding her be patient that he might put through, in some mysterious fashion, his ends. She has played into his hands. It has almost killed the delicate woman. The rascal has literally held the whip over her head. He has exacted secrecy, knowing that, once his nefarious methods were disclosed, his house of cards would fall to the ground. Her faith has been her undoing. Mariotti, assured of it, has killed his victim, because he through her has been acknowledged to represent an apparently inexhaustible value. He may not have meant to kill him, but such has been, or will be, the end. What will be the unutterable self-accusation of the Ambassador when she learns the whole miserable truth?"

He received no answer. He cast a look of keen sympathy in Markoe's direction. Then he stepped forth and closed the door.

Five minutes later the Ambassador followed the little cortège down into the street, where a hushed and threatening crowd was straining its neck and eyes, gazing at an ambulance into which the litter, with its piteous burden, was lifted tenderly. Some of the women had burst into tears. One old hag lifted her scraggy arms, and called

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down blessings on the form which lay so pathetically outlined under its covering, a green cloth obtained from a neighboring billiard saloon. It left the parted lips and the sunken half-closed eyes exposed.

The ambulance drove away.

Then a limp and formless, protesting, pallid thing with livid cheeks and gibbering jaws, was hustled forward, its handcuffs rattling, into a wagon which stood, formidably equipped with officers, near the curbstone.

As it was forced forward, it turned with a curse, and fastened its dark, broken fangs in Lubin's hand. The detective gripped the trapèze performer's shoulder. The mob broke out into the fiercest oaths and denunciations. Some urchins on the roof of a neighboring tenement began pitching stones at the affrighted prisoner. With extreme difficulty the police conveyed their shrieking, slippery customer from the house to the street, and from the curbstone hustled him into the cart. He finally made his way through a horde of vindictive faces and threatening fists. As Lubin, six officers, and Mariotti drove off, the air was rent with a piercing cry, bestial in its ungoverned fury. This cry voiced one word. The word was "Assassin!"

There was no doubt the Cour de Cassation would ring with more of the clown's iniquities than even the present occasion warranted.

Lamballe turned with an alert expression towards the silent figure which stood at his elbow.

"The train leaves for Carembourg at four twenty," he ejaculated, abruptly. "We have no time to lose. We must break the news to them."

The Ambassador drew his watch from his vest pocket, and confirmed Lamballe's time-keeper. A slowly gathering look of determination excluded everything else from his jaded countenance.

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He lifted one finger, and hailed a passing fiacre.

"I go to the hospital—to attend Conway," he vouchsafed, dryly.

"But the Ambassadors?" protested Lamballe, aghast.

The Ambassador was guilty of a faintly ironical smile.

"Pardon me," he explained, "but you are arguing from the French standpoint. Our women are educated to fight their battles out alone."

"But when she knows the truth, when she realizes that what she has so earnestly striven to advance she has only been instrumental in bringing to a fatal development, when she learns that all her secrecy has been in vain, that she, and she altogether is responsible for this unlooked for contretemps?"

"The Ambassador is a brave woman," returned the Ambassador, as he stepped into the fiacre, still with that inscrutable smile on his clean-cut features.

It pervaded them as he lifted his hat to Lamballe, and drove off.



CHAPTER XXXVII

A RADICAL DEVELOPMENT

THE two women had been seated that afternoon, chatting with Marguerite de Launoy. She had left them finally, with their web-like fancy work. Now the spell of acknowledged impotence had fallen upon them. Their observing hostess had striven, for many hours, to dispel it. She had understood with the tenderest sympathy the suspense which left them each so markedly more and more wan each day. Startling pallor and lack of appetite told, more eloquently than words, their own sad story of white

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nights, wherein mother and friend tossed on their pillows, revolving in their strained, dazed brains, the eternal problem which would not be solved.

Blackest silence settled down, silence devoid of elasticity or responsiveness. Kate Markoe let her embroidery fall onto her knees ; its indifferent accomplishment had signified but a subterfuge after all. She looked painfully frail ; her delicate skin was more than ever transparent ; her glorious eyes seemed haunting wells of conscious defeat.

Mrs. Conway looked across at her at last. Their mutual glance of hopelessness told its own piteous story.

"It was twelve weeks yesterday," whispered the mother, with a choked sigh that was infinitely touching. "I have prayed, Kate ; prayed and prayed. Oh, why does not God answer when we ask, as we ask, at once, instead of forcing us to wait. His own good time? Patient ! I have been patient. I feel as though there is no possibility I have not tried to foresee, and fortify myself against. Now, when I wake from that painful broken sleep which assails me at odd hours, I find myself endeavoring to beat off God's will."

She whispered the last words fearfully, looking about her cautiously that no one might surprise so unholy a confession.

In answer the Ambassadors leaned forward, her lips working pitifully, to lay one slim hand close against her friend's delicate wrist. The wailing voice continued ; touch does little to bring together the gaping lips of a widening wound like this.

"I used to have words—words I taught my boy once about 'Thy will be done.' I can't say them any more, Kate ; I cannot say them, try as I may," through her clinched teeth.

"Oh, hush !"

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But Mrs. Conway, for once, was too intent upon her own grief to heed that the sharp protest was stimulated by a desire to ward off, at any cost, this rebuke which embodied so unconsciously cutting a retaliation.

"Don't *you* tell me to 'hush.' I *must* speak. You cannot know what it is to have had a child, and to lose him."

"No."

The low response was fraught with pain ; it seemed a sullen acknowledgment that woman's most cherished privilege was not to be for the delicate creature who, her chin in her scooped palms, her two miserable, hopeless eyes looking into vacancy, sat still.

"To have felt his baby arms about your neck, his baby lips against your bosom ; to have been his sustenance, the breath of his nostrils, his life-stream, and then to have him grow away from you. Motherhood ! Is there any trial on earth equal to the calvary comprised in that term ? We nourish, we sustain, we give our flesh and blood, and then we thrust them from us—are we noble and unselfish ?—that they may 'grow' ! Wifehood is nothing, nothing, I tell you, in comparison," fiercely.

Kate Markoe had bowed her head lower now ; the tears were falling unchecked onto the lace under her drooping chin.

"Men think that their love, forsooth, is enough ; that we women can gratify our thirst for perpetual evidence of affection off a perfunctory caress, or a burning, exacting emphasis of possession. They are mistaken. What we women need, to minister unto, is helplessness ; what our nature craves is the clinging, tender little arms, the tireless, sweet, milk-hungry lips. The rest is never satisfying enough. I wonder often why the need of little children to gratify the hunger in women's hearts has not strewn the

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world with graven images of unrest named Unappeased Motherhood. We desire the hourly consciousness that our loved ones cannot live without us ; not the happen so of a magnetic current which merges into another of its species, and grows together in one channel, and names itself 'affinity,' but the element of self-sacrifice, which comes with birth, and labor, and ecstatic avowal of maternity,—women's natural and voluntary martyrdom. Oh, we are martyrs whichever way we look at our poor, one-sided lives," hysterically, "martyrs, martyrs."

They both fell to sobbing unstintedly.

They did not perceive a masculine figure advance from between two slender Ionic pillars at the end of the long hall whose windows faced the laughing valley. Along that valley the shadows had told their summer idyl of a slow twilight. It now lay sleeping softly under the purple moonlight, a wide shaft of plum-colored velvet barred with sheeny stripes, silver fringed. They threw the trees out, above them, into feathery tossing, bottle-green bouquets of indefinite draughtsmanship.

There had been broken voices outside for some moments which, at first rising and falling in the emotion coincident with an excited relation, had finally subdued into bitterest weeping. Afterwards had come a woman's figure at the doorway, holding apart two sumptuous pieces of tapestry which cut off the downstairs living-room from the main hall. This figure was Marguerite de Launoy's regal, trembling one, with its wide, far-seeing gaze, and its patient eyes. It now stood in one corner, fearful, expectant, its hands clasped before it as though in prayer.

Lamballe came reluctantly forward, manfully intent upon performing in the tenderest fashion the saddest mission of his life. He thought, sorrowfully, that it was a curious coincidence which had made it his portion to take from the

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woman he still fondly loved her hope of peace, present and to come.

How should he do it?

To arrive at this inopportune moment when the mother's heart was almost breaking, in the hour when the wife's confession of her voluntary martyrdom, pent up for years, had at last burst its barriers in that exceeding bitter cry which Lamballe, to his consternation, had surprised unwittingly! She had need of loving arms, and pleading lips; the candid, ardent utterance of a boyish young thing carrying the glory of her own vanished youth in his vivid face,—not himself, the saddened, submissive version of middle-aged philosophy which men name wisdom, and know to be but tolerance.

She was the love of his life, and he must break her heart!

She looked up. Her eyes were blinded with tears; her poor unsought-for lips, which now trembled undisguisedly over having sought in her child's incipient caresses the legitimate passion they had missed, were pallid and drawn. Choking sighs came through.

As she glanced up she saw Lamballe. Very unaffectedly, and quite simply, she wiped away her tears. His tall figure came forward, out of the gloom, stumbling a trifle. His expressive face was stamped with a new sorrow, which she instantly perceived. His manner expressed a hesitancy which was foreign to Mrs. Conway's knowledge of him. She trembled. Her heart shook with an awful dread.

She sprang to her feet and ran forward, extending helplessly her shaking, exquisite hands.

"You have been absent two days!" she cried. "What news?"

All at once Lamballe found he had lost the power of

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speech. He remembered afterwards that strange sensation was the offshoot of an anguished look she had given him, which cut through him at that agitated moment like a knife. Then, seeing his vain effort to speak, she made a commanding gesture, and walked forward. At another time her act would have been criticised justly as unwarrantably familiar. In this, it signified self-forgetfulness.

She did the only thing it occurred to her to do, doffing conventionality in the process with that simplicity which attacks all great natures at supreme moments. In the doing she forgot that once, many years ago, she had been guilty of the same sweet, unstudied impulse under totally different auspices: at that time, as in this, indifferent to the interpretation which might be put upon her spontaneity.

The thought only flashed over them both, simultaneously, a moment later when their eyes met.

It had been the day he had asked her to be his wife. She had answered his question, through which his heart beats panted out their story of self-depreciation, at once, in order—he had seized the fact of such untold sweetness with avidity then, as he remembered it now—that he should be put out of pain!

She had said instantly, her fair face lifted in radiant joy, her maidenly acknowledgment at its apogee of self-revelment, “How can I help it?”

Lamballe now felt suddenly translated into that curious state which all human souls frequent once or twice in life, of having lived through this era before, at a time when he might have profited off its richness, and had not.

Mrs. Conway stood with one hand on each of his shoulders, looking in all confidence and faith into the face of the man who up to now she considered had most wantonly betrayed her faith. The tears stood, arrested crystal

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pearls, upon her cheeks ; her pure eyes blazed out the same peremptory command which a lioness might show in a reach-out claw-grip for her cub.

"What news?" she repeated, with a little shake. Then, as he did not speak, a sudden awful pallor fell across her face, putting out its faint rose tint, thinning its contour, and leaving the indelible impress of a dreaded catastrophe.

"He is dead?" she asked, dully. The tones seemed husks. The fair face was chiselled in stone.

Lamballe's heart beat quickly. She was striving,—his great live mind encompassed the thought with a mighty throb,—she was endeavoring *now, as then*, to help him tell his story in the way which would hurt him the least. Faithful to her own unselfish nature, in spite of the mutually inexplicable past, her spirit had risen to the height of having spared him pain once again. She had said it for him to save him from suffering !

The question of either her duplicity, or unfaith, was stilled for evermore. Only the old love stood in good stead as he caught both her hands in his, and, pressing them down against his shoulders very gently, as he did so said,—

"Madeleine, your boy has been found ; but ill, very ill. If you are able you must go to him, but——"

"Oh, say it quickly. I am stronger now."

The "now" leaped up involuntarily ; a reveille sounding the morning. It registered a soul's release from captivity. For her, too, the years, in this complex moment, had vanished.

They two stood self-confessed. Oh, ecstasy unparalleled and untold ! Fate had brought them soul to soul in her deepest sorrow, as they had stood once, knee-deep in youth and hope, clasped each to each, a golden love-fraught day !

Shame might have accompanied another woman's ac-

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knowledge of fulfilment under such circumstances. Madeleine Conway's nature was too honest to deny that, even within the radius of her son's possible going out, she could realize his loss might be born with comparative calm, if Ferdinand Lamballe stood at her side, to support her in her bitterest hour. For grief is twofold when undivided.

"He has been found," he said at last. In spite of himself his voice gushed forth richly. He had clasped her hands in his two, caressingly; he was taking a deep draught from those blue eyes for which he had hungered so long. They were lifted now, giving him back glance for glance all her woman's heart revealed. They stood so close he could see the iris widen and darken. "We fear," he added, slowly, "that if he does recover—his reason—it may be irretrievably shattered." If there had been some way to say the cruel words more gently than this, he thought, that way had not been pointed out to him.

Mrs. Conway trembled visibly. Lamballe stood with the dear hands in his; they were gradually turning icy cold.

"His 'reason'?"

The owner of Carembourg changed his position with a start.

The voice was not Mrs. Conway's; neither did it come from the imposing figure on the threshold that had stood all this while silently watching the little scene, which had held so unconscious and unexpected a circumstance.

The voice was Mrs. Markoe's.

She stood now, an ashen thing, made, it seemed to Lamballe's acute perception, of a thin white flame, which licked up his meaning, and burned it out more quickly than he could form the syllables.

"His reason! You mean that he is mad?"

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Her question seemed to be voicing itself without her own volition through her parched lips.

"He has been found," Lamballe explained very distinctly,—he thought the sooner the agony was over, the quicker would come the Ambassadors's adjustment of self-control; possibly, poor thing!—"in the house of a clown, who is known to all Paris as 'Mariotti.' We have not learned as yet when or by what means the clown obtained knowledge of his victim's identity, or how he lured him to his foul nest. We only have surprised the fact that Conway has been subjected to a course of slow poisoning and brutal treatment for weeks."

He stopped a moment, hopeful that the Ambassadors might think to collect herself!

Of this she seemed for the moment incapable. She was gazing at him with an expression of self-accusing apprehension, which increased rapidly, as his words confirmed her awful dread that she, and she alone, had been instrumental in bringing the affair to its present hideous development. Oh, the pity of it, the untold pity of the fact that wherein she had meant to aid and expedite, she had only warped and ruined!

"For some reason," continued Lamballe swiftly, "he has been kept there. I presume, as a sort of hostage. As soon as Mariotti discovered his identity he turned on the screws with some intermediary."

He wished she would turn away those piteous eyes.

"The clown, no doubt, intended ultimately to play the part of the stage brigand, and offer to release his victim, alive or dead, upon the payment of a certain ransom. It is, I fear, too late. If there had not been some one in collusion with him in the past few weeks, from whom he has extracted funds irregularly, exacting secrecy, and promising fulfilment in the natural course of events, Conway would have

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been given up long since, as his oppressor would not have been provided with means to carry out his dramatic satire."

"How has he been 'tortured'?" colorlessly. She had one hand across her eyes. The other was twisting the piece of embroidery she held in her shaking fingers tight about them.

"I think it is wiser and kinder," very pitifully, "if that portion of my story remains unembellished."

Lamballe had stated the dry facts as concisely as his tact and delicacy allowed him. He was profoundly regretful at the sad part so unwittingly played in this long drama by the woman before him. He had remained as yet undecided as to the measure to be meted out to her concerning Conway's downfall. World-wise, he seldom deducted unless called upon to do so; then he exercised the utmost sympathy and forbearance of criticism. He considered the Ambassador's wife an exquisite creature, with more than the customary feminine lack of judgment. He thought it quite likely that she had been induced to aid Mariotti in order to secure more quickly her own peace of mind; for he had taken into consideration long ere this the painful attitude in which Markoe and his wife stood regarding their helper, who had sacrificed himself in the international cause, out of a natural exuberance which seemed the overflow of the young American temperament.

But as he looked at the figure, gradually stiffening before him into what appeared an image of grey clay, he dimly wondered if, after all, that expression of aversion he had seen gradually spreading over the Ambassador's neutral countenance had been entirely unwarranted. Those eyes, the only living things in the beautiful stony face, were certainly self-denunciative. The hands had fallen to her sides. Her embroidery lay at her feet. Her

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gown, with its trimmings of turquoise and jet, rattled a little under the restless tapping of her foot.

Her stiffened lips let forth one word, after her shamed eyes had wandered across Mrs. Conway, who was contemplating her curiously with a growing suspicion that made Kate Markoe shrink.

"Where?" she asked.

Lamballe mentioned the name of the hospital to which Conway had been conveyed.

The Ambassadors turned even paler, if that had been possible. She walked swiftly across the room and pulled a tapestried bell-strap.

"What are you going to do?"

The imperious question was Mrs. Conway's.

"The only thing. I am going to Paris by the next train to nurse Jack."

"That is my office."

"As you will. We will go together. When is the next train?" to Lamballe.

"There is one in another half hour."

But as they sped on their way the two women confronted each other, for the first time, with a warring question between them.

Lamballe, his arms folded, silently watched the flying landscape, moon-kissed and finally dawn-chilled, as they steamed towards the Gare de Lyons. The silence was broken by Mrs. Conway, five minutes before they drew into the station.

"Kate, you are like my own child. Tell me: did you know of this?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I have so often wondered why you took it all so to heart. Your inexplicable absences; your morbid sense,

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expressed so strangely every now and then, of having been the unwitting cause of my pain."

The frozen, miserable face, with its sombre eyes, turned towards its questioner. It scorned to deny.

"I strove," whispered the poor woman, almost deliriously, "to reverse the will of God. This is my just punishment."

"You knew then of—Mariotti?" persistently.

Now the eyes looked straight into Madeleine Conway's. The Ambassadors had ignored Lamballe ever since he had voiced the truth. He seemed part and parcel to her, at this brutal moment, of the cruelest misconception of modern times.

"I have known," said the hard, dull voice, resolve to be just in every shade of its utterance, "that Mariotti, and Mariotti alone, according to his own story, knew of Jack's whereabouts. How? Why? The time is too short to tell. I came upon the fact, seeking blindly to help. I thought in paying Mariotti, I was expediting his promise to deliver Jack into our hands. He told me if I spoke, or mentioned our secret to any one, his prey would escape him. I thought I was saving Jack by aiding Mariotti. But this,"—with a dry sob,—“do you know what this means? It means that I am a murderess!"

Mrs. Conway made one involuntary gesture of horror.

Then, with a visible strong determination to punish herself for such an unsympathetic delinquency, she immediately clasped one arm about the slender, rigid shoulder at her side.

"How you must have suffered!" she said, gently, still in a slightly puzzled fashion. In her outspoken expression of forgiveness she slew what she considered an unworthy suspicion, and coerced loyalty at one breath, the way fine women do.

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"If you pity me I shall die!" returned Kate, fiercely.

But her shoulder had yielded to the arm which lay around it as men's tongues curl about proffered moisture, when, dying of thirst, their wants are ministered unto.



CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE REVERSE OF THE MEDAL

KATE MARKOE was spared a confrontation with the man whose search she had endeavored so vainly to facilitate during those fourteen agonized weeks of suspense.

When the three travellers arrived at the hospital they were informed that the Ambassador had returned to his home an hour before. After installing his helpless friend in the sunniest, most spacious of wards, and providing him with two Sisters of Mercy to administer to his wants, in obedience to the orders of a famous practitioner, who was king of this complicated realm, he had withdrawn.

Mrs. Conway was assured that the patient could not do more wisely than to remain for a week at least where he was, if he lived. She was informed that everything that science could do would be brought to bear upon her son's case.

On receipt of this reasonable information, Jack's mother set to work to organize matters. She peremptorily forbade Mrs. Markoe to do anything more formidable than to betake herself home and put herself to bed.

"You look like a ghost," exclaimed the sad woman who thus advised. "It is my portion to remain here, and fight for Jack's life. They shall not deny that privilege to his own mother."

And they did not. One glance at the determined femi-

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nine personage, with the vivid lips and cheeks, convinced the hospital attendants that Conway's chances of recovery would be increased doublefold did his mother place herself at the helm. Mrs. Conway's courage had risen to the occasion, eloquent of that grasp of emergency which, for centuries, has declared itself to be intrinsically of woman-kind.

Superiority walks in unaffectedly and takes its place, not waiting to write volumes upon duty, or harangue multitudes concerning the higher life.

As Lamballe and Mrs. Markoe drove to the Avenue Marceau, she gave a few orders to her quondam host in regard to some wearing apparel she had left strewn about her luxurious apartments in her preparations for a hurried departure from Carembourg. She added that she would be grateful did Lamballe, upon his return there, send her maid home with her trunks, as she intended to remain in Paris.

Lamballe resignedly acquiesced, after having expressed his regret that their little party should have been so ruthlessly broken up. "Let us hope for the best, dear madame," he urged, earnestly. "Conway has youth on his side, and an unimpaired constitution."

But all his kind efforts to insure his companion's peace of mind were futile. The lines of the fair, frozen face at his side remained fixed and white. The shamed look of guilt increased minute by minute. With it there had come a shrinking mental dread, which fortified as they stopped before the Embassy. As she descended, the delicate curves of Kate Markoe's lips straightened into a hard line. It was evident she was about to confront a far more complicated problem than might be comprised either in the case of the helpless invalid at the hospital, or her own conscience.

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To explain her conduct to the Ambassador, she had by this come to consider the only just manner of taking the consequences of her own so sadly proven deficient policy to aid.

Even now she could picture the level look which would greet her, the total lack of responsiveness, the cold weighing of her inexplicable act. The colorless eyes with their expression of neutrality, the listening attitude which did not commit itself, the polite attentiveness which promised nothing, were part and parcel of her righteous judge. She had determined that Conway must be shielded at all costs. He had suffered enough. If his death followed, and she were responsible for it, there must be no blot left to mar the purity of his professed intention. She and she alone, out of her feminine intuition, had surprised the unwholesome truth that his quixoticism had been but the complement of his direst weakness. As Kate Markoe thought out the entire miserable occurrence, she deplored it as an unfortunate circumstance as well as a lamentable contrariety—unpossessed of either healthy germ, or explanatory substance. Latterly, the enormity of her own vanity had impressed her deeply. It stood forth stripped of anything but deplorable weakness. It stung her highly-polished sense of the fitness of things. Her love of admiration, her heart-hunger, had never pre-imagined, as the result of their excessiveness, so unpalatable a sequence as Conway's deceit.

Jack had always seemed very young to her. Albeit but two or three years his senior, she had honestly experienced a maternal interest in the young fellow. His enthusiasms aroused her; his outspoken idealization of herself flattered her; his final disclosure of intemperance she fought off with all her woman's wit. The sudden flame of passion which had betrayed him was an unpleasant revelation to

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her, the inconsequent cause of it. Only after its disclosure had she come into the positive realization of his translation of her invariable kindness. Then, womanlike, she strove to instantaneously undo what she had been instrumental in exciting ; reprehensibly ; in idleness. The brief instant in which she had fought out loyally in all honor, and self-acknowledgment of weakness, her woman's part to slay everything responsive in her, she considered but her just portion. Principle was the keystone of her nature. She had been level-headed enough to recognize that principle must guide her more than ever, when in a moment of sheer weariness Conway might have believed she loved him.

In her innermost soul Kate Markoe, no matter how fully she appreciated her success in every other sphere where the world's acclamation warranted her conscious pride that she was beautiful and desirable, never for an instant lost sight of the bitter fact that she represented the weakest ingredient in her husband's make-up. The knowledge saddened her ; it seared the edge of all her momentary joys ; it was the canker-worm at the root of her evanescent indiscretions. Now, with the conviction that she was nothing to the Ambassador, it was coming upon her that, through her evident lack of judgment, her behavior would justly warrant his complete aversion.

This was the thought which for the past few tortured hours had been making of her a thing of pallid clay. It was the state which to-day, in view of recent disclosures, she was certain was to be her perpetual portion. She knew that she had, to the best of her ability, fought off a very genuine reality, disclaimed it, and turned Conway back into the groove of his past moderation. But this her husband would never learn. Even if it had been possible for him to understand, she felt herself incapable of finding words to describe to him her suspicion, and later the

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knowledge that all was not well with his trusted advocate. In that memorable interview in the conservatory, the conviction of Conway's miserable reach-out for dishonor, which had so shocked her, while at the same time she insisted to herself loyally Conway had not taken into adequate consideration its lurid and unfair import, when, swept off his feet by an unbridled impulse, he had betrayed his most desperate and unholy desire, she blamed herself far more than the boy she had infatuated.

But alongside her generous mercifulness for Conway, she pitted Markoe : upright, inflexible, just ; a man among men ; a master of common-sense ; an expert as regarded integrity. He had never seemed to her so entirely to be respected as he did now. There was a simplicity about his direct methods which began to attract her oddly. What had seemed colorless before, now took on the true blue of concentrated strength. His very neutrality seemed honor ; that honor which stands alone, unobtrusively, regardless of the warring elements about it. Above all, she was proud of him, and mutual pride in one another is the fundamental principle which holds man and woman yoked together in peace and probity. Her sense of unworthiness increased minute by minute. It made her almost cry out.

She began to experience a wholesome sense of indignation towards Conway, who had already made her suffer so much for so little. He was weak. Her husband—how she gloried in the conviction—was strong. Conway was volatile. Markoe stood a rock of mental balance, by this faculty alone having out-distanced many of his contemporaries. Until this racking hour she had never looked ahead far enough to imagine what her mortification might be were he not equally proud of her.

Five minutes after Lamballe had quitted her at her own door, and driven towards his club for breakfast and a bath,

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Mrs. Markoe slowly made her way along the corridor opposite her own apartment, and knocked at the door of her husband's bedroom. Receiving no answer, she entered. The room was vacant. The bed had not been occupied. She returned to her own bedchamber a little feebly. Loss of sleep and food made her light-headed. The task she had before her appalled even her courageous spirit. She threw off her hat and cloak. Then—a tall, slim figure, clad in costly garments, her anxious face framed in a toss of dishevelled hair : a face which told a sad story of misery and sleeplessness—she hesitatingly walked towards her husband's study. He kept up his writing half the night there, and sometimes all through the day.

The room felt atmospherically delicious to her, after a night spent in the railway carriage in a cramped position. She completely lost sight of her own feelings, however, when her glance took in her husband's face. There were lines about his handsome compressed mouth which she had never seen before. She caught her breath. He was seated in an arm-chair he had brought with him from America ; it stood before a glowing fire. He seemed to have been reclining for hours in the relaxed position in which she had surprised him, although that could not have been according to the information which she had received at the hospital about him.

As she came forward, he rose and pushed his chair towards her.

“ You arrived by the midnight train ? ”

He had evidently made a lightning calculation between the time her light tap had aroused him, and she had made her presence manifest.

“ Yes,” she affirmed.

After that first glance she had not raised her eyes

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towards him. How should she face his trenchant condemnation of her too quixotic act? She saw it now as he must have seen it all along, powerless to evade its consequences through her foolishness. Oh, why had her weakness demanded so cruel a development to bring her to her senses?



CHAPTER XXXIX

THE AMBASSADRESS'S STORY

"STEPHEN, I have come to tell you something," she began, quietly. She seated herself, and drew up to the fire. Crouched forward, looking into it intently, conscious of the dread pallor of her face, hoping the flames might burn some color into her cold cheeks, she paused.

The Ambassador did not stir.

She half-turned towards him. He was standing when she first commenced to speak. After a little, he walked towards an upright chair which stood near the mantelpiece, and, letting his head droop, looked into the flames. Thus, avoiding each other's gaze, they strove to patch up what she had so ruthlessly striven to destroy.

"Once," she said, very humbly, "I thought you governed my actions too narrowly. I was wrong. You had lived, and suffered more than I. You knew."

The Ambassador lifted his hand involuntarily, and shelved it across his eyes.

"Perhaps," she faltered, "I should have obeyed implicitly. I might have done so had you been a little more gentle with me; but I have often thought you could not know what it was to be commanded to obey, without any reason given why one should not act according to one's

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heart's dictation. Recently I have, as regards Jack's case, taken the reins into my own hands. I have come now to tell you that you have been right always, and that I have been wrong. The terrible result of our mission—for, whichever way it ends, you and I cannot consider it anything but unsuccessful if Jack's life or reason pay the price for it—lies all with me."

She paused, and beat her hands together for a moment, almost frantically. She tried to dry the tears which were falling fast from her wide eyes, but they flowed faster as she spoke.

"If there is any penalty I can pay," she said, "I will pay it. If there is any ache you feel that I can assuage, I will try to assuage it. No matter what you can say, I know, however, that I have been instrumental in facilitating your deepest mortification."

There was a dead silence. The Ambassador had neither refuted nor agreed.

She knew herself abjectly feeling out mentally to learn whether or no he met her avowal half-way. There was no evidence that he even heard her. His handsome hand—strong, well-formed, a hand whose warm, firm grasp she knew could insure protection and a restful sense of the most generous helpfulness—remained motionless, scooped above his brows. His figure might in its intense rigidity have revealed to a disinterested observer the fact that every nerve was strained to its utmost to absorb her faintest whisper. But this she did not understand him well enough to realize. She only felt an increasing sensation of desolation assailing her proud spirit, inch by inch, as she let forth her confession.

She continued, one hand doubled fiercely in a hard knot under the woollen fringe about the chair, the other twisting in and out her wisp of a pocket handkerchief, wet with

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tears, which now had suddenly ceased to flow, her eyes a little hard, her face flushed feverishly, her lips now and then bitterly compressed.

"The night of the Launoy ball, you will remember, I asked you to accompany me. You refused. I think I speak correctly when I state that the reason you advanced for your refusal was that you wished to read some news which your eyes had missed until then. You had before you a full account, in a home newspaper, which had arrived that afternoon. The incident has, without doubt, escaped you."

Still he was silent. He saw—oh, memory, how bitter and yet how sweet!—a figure attired as Folly, a dimpled arm lifted above a sunny, curl-tossed head on which was fastened a tiny tri-colored cap, glittering with jewels and clattering with bells. He was fastening the clasp of a mask against the warm nape of a creamy neck. He drew a deep breath. The curls fell; the mask clicked into place. "That will do," had come a petulant child's voice; and he had given an hour of his life had she inclined towards him!

"I went to the ball that night prepared to enjoy myself," with a faint echo of past defiance which seemed, even to its propounder, in this moment which throbbed with acute misery, infantine in its flaunting effort to be nonchalant. "Why not? You had your newspaper; I liked to dance. We both had our way; we were quits. I have heard from some very clever people that matrimony conducted from so exalted a stand-point installs invariable felicity, and the ultimate content of both parties."

He began pacing the floor heavily. The chandelier rattled a little, and then stopped, as he passed under it. His hands were clasped behind his back, under his coat-tails; his eyes looked out ahead, sombrely.

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"Imagine my surprise, when Mariotti and his double arrived, the second Mariotti, the harlequin who saluted Monsieur Lamballe en Mariotti on the landing of the staircase, where Mrs. Conway and I agreed to meet, turned out to be Jack !"

The Ambassador arrested his steps. He stood directly under the chandelier, his mild regard addressed steadily towards his wife. Her face was turned away from him. She was apparently dragging her story out of the flames ahead of her.

"He asked me, after he had made himself known to me, to go into the conservatory with him, as he had something of importance to communicate. Naturally, I was so astonished at the contretemps, so curious to know what had impelled him to take such a queer step, that I acquiesced. Once there, he said he had come to Paris to find out whether or no Monsieur Lamballe was in town or at Carembourg. If he could prove Lamballe in Paris, he intended returning to Carembourg to pursue his survey unmolested. It seemed to me—I told him so—a long way to come in order to establish so apparently insignificant a detail. He assured me everything depended upon it ; that Lamballe's certain presence in Paris would afford him ample leeway to ascertain whether or no the stratum extended across the border. Immediately after this he bade me farewell and returned, as I supposed, to Carembourg."

She stopped and swallowed something spasmodically in her throat. Markoe still looked at her intently. A coil of hair had loosened ; it fell along her black dress to her knees. It was singularly soft and fine, he was thinking irrelevantly, when she interrupted his reflections.

"I attached no special importance to his coming, until you informed me that he had mysteriously disappeared. Then I put two and two together. I concluded Mariotti

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must have been aware of his presence in Paris, else where had Jack obtained the clown's costume? I secured Mariotti's address. I sought him out. He swore at our first interview that, with the exception of the night of the ball when Jack had come to him and purloined his costume, he had not seen him. I made my most egregious mistake in remunerating him for this information. Ultimately he wrote me, requesting another interview. I accorded it. This time he informed me that he knew of Jack's whereabouts, but that he had not the power to extricate him from a vile prison, in which he was incarcerated by some mysterious third party, unless I would advance him a sum of money with which to bribe the third party. I advanced it ; at first in small sums, later in larger ones as he demanded it, vowing all the while that Jack's jailers were more and more exorbitant in their demands, and less and less desirous of releasing so desirable a prey. All along I kept the fact from you, because I feared that if you knew Jack had come up to Paris, you might consider he had been guilty of neglecting what you so seriously intended to overcome ; besides, I began to dread your anger because I had not confided in you in the first place. Mariotti had sworn me to secrecy. You were occupied. I had learned not to beg for what was mine by right."

"Meaning?" Markoe's voice was purely interrogatory.

"Meaning your undivided attention, which, I think you must admit, is not always extended to my 'caprices.'"

There was a dull pause. She continued.

"But afterwards when, week by week, he extorted from me funds which you were so confidently handing over to me, believing they paid for my personal needs, I felt like a thief and a hypocrite. It was too late to recede. Mariotti now threatened that if I betrayed him, Jack would suffer the consequences. If it took all day," she interrupted

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herself passionately, "I could not express to you my utter self-disgust in the entire business. I loathed Mariotti; I was in his toils. When last night Monsieur Lamballe informed me that indirectly I had been the instrumental cause in torturing Jack to death, I determined to tell you the truth, and ask you to let me go."

She had risen now. The two velvet bruises under her great eyes were more than ever apparent. The slender outlines of her figure, which had been so delicious once, now seemed straight and formless.

"You wish to travel?" inquired the Ambassador, perfunctorily.

"I cannot bear——" she faltered, her head had fallen forward onto her breast, her eyes were bent upon the carpet at her feet. "I wish to get away from under the burden of your contempt."

"But——"

"I cannot bear it," she cried, impetuously, the tears streaming down her cheeks now undisguisedly. She began to walk to and fro hurriedly. "The situation has always been odious to me. It is more than ever so now. It has been unsupportable enough to live alongside of a man who is made of iron, or of stone, but to know the graven image despises me, to know he blames me, to know that what was once mine of respect and gentlest care no longer exists. Oh, no—no," brokenly, "it is beyond my strength."

She stopped.

His regard was luminous. Almost, in a single flashing glance she had bestowed upon him, it seemed to her his lips had moved in prayer. She looked again involuntarily, but he had turned abruptly towards a window. He let the shade slide up to the top with a startling rattle as he spoke.

"You must remain," he said.

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She started violently, aggressively. He continued with uncompromising firmness, the underlying force in his tone crushing her mad intention to atoms, so coolly was it fraught with common-sense.

"Given the fact that I deplore your action, we are none the less man and wife. Married persons are united for better and for worse. Had I committed the fault you plead guilty of, would you for that cause alone have sent me from you?"

"No—no." The negative rang out without one instant's hesitation.

He turned towards her, in response to it, with that beautiful, luminous look, which she never remembered to have seen light up his face before, brilliantly apparent. "I think," he said, "that if you had considered the gravity of your projected departure, you would have decided less hastily. You will——"

"But it has nothing to do with marriage—our union."

"Why so?" imperiously.

"It is so utterly inept."

A shadow crossed his face. "I ask you," he said, clearly and very distinctly, "to remain with me until Conway's recovery, or death, at least."

"And then?" The question leaped from her, almost without her volition.

"If Conway recovers I will ask him for his story."

"Until then?"

"Until then I will trust him."

"But if he dies?" The inquiry was choked.

Markoe rose to answer a summons at the door. "In that case," he said, "you will tell me the remainder of *our* story."

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CHAPTER XL

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SIX months later, when the lilacs were in bloom, Conway's abused intellect drifted back slowly into its own again. It had been a long pull, arduous for the anxious watchers ; trying, and dangerously fluctuating for Mariotti's innocent victim. The winter was damp, gloomy, unattractive as only Paris winters can be with their burden of sun-deprived days.

Towards spring devout thankfulness spread its exhilarating glow in all their hearts. The sick man's young limbs strengthened, and gradually began to take on a semblance of their original contour. His eyes brightened, and reflected in faintest measure what the ears heard, and communicated clearly to the weakened brain.

Listless, indifferent, lethargic, the patient had lain for weeks with a faint wandering smile upon his vacant face, sadder than tears. There had been, too, a far-away look in his eyes which seemed a presentiment of extinction : his words had babbled of unknown places, sometimes dreamily, sometimes madly as he crouched struggling fiercely against a hideous, unseen foe, or smiled foolishly up into an imaginary angel face. Gradually the invalid was promoted from liquid to solid food ; he was taught to talk and to walk. At last his bodily strength increased ; his medicines were taken from him, and a powerful mental drug substituted. The watchers, prayerful and on the alert, saw a faint flicker which fortified and broadened, to finally extinguish permanently the vacuous expression which had made them so sick at heart. The stimulant, which had been ad-

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ministered as the final test, had whipped up the dormant mental faculties, and had roused them from their lethargy to work once more. They had only been dulled into temporary subjection, after all: not found wanting, or irretrievably diseased.

The first change in outside events which Conway recorded, lying listlessly there in weak convalescence, taking note of his friends' faces as slowly they made their way out to him from the world of grim spectres, and miasma-stricken environment, was that Lamballe seemed now the trusted advocate, whereas before he had played an egregiously unimportant rôle in this, their midst. This fact the young fellow accepted, as youth is wont to accept such changes, thoughtlessly, as an improvement upon the old prejudice. Afterwards, weeks afterwards, it slowly broke in upon him that the cause of his mother's placid, peculiarly sweetened expression, was not entirely owing to his own almost miraculous convalescence. It had, instead, more to do with that sparkling conversationalist, that purposeful individual who filled up the long evenings with his brilliant recounting of the day's doings, who kept the vast apartment blooming with the rarest hot-house flowers, and who peremptorily forbade the stately chatelaine of one of the most agreeable Paris-American salons to do more than her share of nursing.

The invalid used to lie with serenely puzzled eyes and watch the pair. One day he surprised in his own fancy the consciousness that the discordant note in his mother's make-up, which had seemed to him the only false element in her, had either gone to sleep, or was no more.

When he alluded to this, she flushed. Then she knelt down by his reclining chair. He listened quietly while she told him her story. When she concluded he turned his

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face away for a moment. Then he looked back at her with a pair of feverishly bright eyes.

"It is all as it should be, mammy," he vouchsafed, feebly. "I, too, have been planning a change, as soon as the trial is over. This illness has shown me my uselessness. I am eager to test my strength. I want to start out for myself. I have been wondering how I could break the news of my intentional departure to you."

"You will go?" The tears stood confessed in her startled eyes.

"I will go," he confirmed, stretching, the two vertical lines deepening between his sombre eyes,—the expression of his face was daily settling into firm curves,—"where I can work. Paris is no place for an ambitious American. He needs his own country, his favorite atmosphere, the competitive impetus of his fellow-men. I have been idle too long. Satan, you know, might find mischief for me to do."

Then he came around to the subject of the Ambassador.

His mother had been holding forth in exalted terms over Marguerite de Launoy. She, it seemed, had surprised both Mrs. Conway's and Lamballe's secret, and had ministered unto it in marvellously adroit fashion. She it was who unearthed the remembrance of proud Madeleine Farragut's meek submission to her autocratic father's whims. It was she who had recollected a day when he, in her hearing, had forbidden any intercourse between his beautiful daughter and the then indigent Frenchman. It was the Duchesse de Launoy also who had possessed the temerity to imagine that the letter Lamballe had written had never been received. In which case, weighted ever with this supposition, she had brought the two quondam lovers together, and witnessed with sympathetic eyes the confirmation of her presumption that they might still care

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for one another. Now she was awaiting with impatience Conway's recovery, that she might announce the coming nuptials in royal fashion, at La Vallière.

The Ambassador called daily, Mrs. Conway affirmed in answer to her son's inquiry. He had looked in from the first once a week, in person, in search of a radical change. He had encouraged and sustained them all. He was the same thorough-going, silent force which they all welcomed, and had learned more and more to appreciate.

Just here the invalid inquired abruptly for Mrs. Markoe.

"Kate," replied Mrs. Conway,—she was bending over a piece of fancy work by this ; her graceful snow-crowned head stood out against a piece of tapestry behind it ; her eyes were downcast,—“Kate has been very ill. We have almost been fearful that she might not recover. Not a serious illness exactly,—it has not confined her to her bed, I mean,—but just nervous, utter prostration, and listlessness.”

“What was the cause of her illness?”

“I think that the unwitting part she played in your unfortunate experience worried her extremely,” returned Mrs. Conway, hesitatingly.

“I have not known.”

She related to him, softly and very pitifully, the facts. He listened with his face turned away from the light. When she had finished he did not speak for a long time. Then he asked, “Has she, too, visited us?”

“I have not been able to prevail upon her to do so,” answered Mrs. Conway. “I have said all I dared ; Stephen has advised her to be sensible. She says that she will never rest until she has asked your forgiveness.”

There was the sudden harsh burst of a brass band passing outside. It was a national fête day. Paris was beribboned and beflagged from the Place de la Concorde to the Trocadéro ; from La Villette to Bellevue. The river was gay

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with brightly decorated craft, thronged with holiday seekers. Spring was in the air, on the faces of the multitude which, in festive array, gorged the avenues, the river, and the by-streets. Some cavalry officers rode clatteringly across the cobble-stones, under the trees, up the bridle path which stretches from the Tuileries Gardens to Passy. The windows were thrown wide. Conway glanced out ; then he sighed shortly.

"Will you tell her," he said quietly, after a long silence, "to come? Tell her that I wish to see her because I consider that I have nothing to forgive."

It was two days later. Mrs. Conway had gone to a bazaar, over which she had been requested to preside as patroness. Lamballe had accompanied her.

Conway lay fully dressed on a lounge by the window, listlessly turning the leaves of a home magazine. He heard the footman say "*Monsieur est chez lui. Oui.*" He looked around.

He had thought his visitor might be Markoe, or even Lubin, with whom the invalid had struck up a mutually admiring acquaintance. He had heard nothing in answer to his own request regarding the Ambassadors. His mother had responded to it absently, altering her position and the subject of the conversation peremptorily.

Now he turned, and saw a slender figure in a grey gown standing motionless in the embrasure of the doorway, looking towards him from under a huge grey chip hat heavily burdened with white roses.

He had been forbidden to rise. Perhaps because of this, added to his heart beating with a fierce apprehensive suddenness, he held forth his hand, as though to aid her to come towards him.

She sprang forward, seized it, and pressed it convulsively

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in both of hers. Then she turned abruptly away from him, and walked swiftly towards a far-off window in another corner of the room.

He remembered dimly that the last time he had seen her she had stood—where had she stood? He felt an awful unexpected stab in a region of his anatomy which he had forgotten. Was it his heart or his head? Then he remarked, lightly,—

“You have been long in coming. Why?”

“I could not get up the courage,” she responded, visibly endeavoring to be commonplace, to fail most lamentably. Her eyes, those long almond-shaped eyes, with their arched brows, were fastened upon him. Bit by bit they were taking in the cadaverous aspect of his face; his long thin limbs which she had known so shapely and muscular; the general pathetic lassitude of his listless figure.

“Am I, then, so formidable?”

Her eyes filled with tears. She raised her hand and covered them for a moment. Then, with an imperious gesture as though scorning her own weakness, she drew up a chair and looked into his face.

“I want to tell you why I did it,” she said, impulsively, “what inspired me.”

“Suppose we let it drop,” he suggested, oddly fearful that she might open his wound. It had only been slumbering after all, he was cogitating fearfully. Any little accident might bring it to life; and such life! Such a throbbing, impotent, insurmountable thing; hopeless; ever self-denying; silent. For then and there, with weakness palpable assailing him in every member, he had determined now and evermore to be dumb concerning his chief ill. He knew what seems dead is often considered evidence of a past as much as a present non-existence.

She had cast one puzzled glance at him. Then she said,

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very clearly and slowly, "You must allow me to cure myself in my own way."

"Do so."

"I thought," she explained, "that when you left me that night you were in a desperate mood. Oh, of course, purely imaginary, but a little desperate. The next day events fell into their customary groove, and the thought was crowded out. It was only when I was informed that you had so mysteriously disappeared that I suddenly remembered what you had said. Do you remember? You said 'Good-bye forever.'"

Her gaze was wide, strained, fearful.

Again he held out his hand with that helpful gesture.

"How little you know me and my exaggerated manner of talk," he said, lightly. "Those words were merely a form of expression prompted by the intrigue and masked batteries of the night. I intended seeing you in a week, possibly at one of your teas, surrounded by your satellites."

He lay gazing at her brightly, not an ounce of anything but a slightly deprecatory rebuke in his look.

"You did not mean it, then?"

"My dear Mrs. Markoe, if men of my character were made responsible for all their words, the Bourbons would be reigning in Paris to-day."

She looked at him searchingly.

"I am grateful," she vouchsafed finally, very softly, with a long breath. "I wish I had known before, though. It would have saved us both so much."

He did not answer this. He had turned his glance away. He was gazing absently at a cortège of slender little maidens, clad mistily in their first communion robes, who passed his window and vanished hazily.

"With this conviction," her voice went on, "when I

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made up my mind that Mariotti knew of your whereabouts, I determined to frustrate your efforts to make way with yourself."

He looked straight up at her and smiled.

"I think," he said, "that you might have given me credit for more balance."

"No," she returned, instantly, and if the slight dejection contained in her tone signified that her vanity had received a mortal sting, he rejoiced over it—for her sake.

"The one thing I never gave you credit for was balance. You were romantic, delightful, suggestive. Stephen has balance. I never knew, until lately, how thoroughly he outpaced most people in that seemingly simple quality."

"Stephen scores then, as always?" with an air of laughing resignation.

She bit her lip.

"And he deserves it," the invalid hastened to subjoin, heartily.

A little warm glow crept up into Kate Markoe's delicate cheeks.

"I always told you that," she affirmed, proudly, "if you remember, from the first. But won't you tell me what befell you that night; how Mariotti got you into his clutches?"

He hesitated a few moments. He remembered having hurled himself from her contemptuous sight, reckless of coming events, intent upon one scheme; to beat away forever from his scarred memory the sight of her haughty, scornful, beloved face. As he had run into the street, madly unmindful of his whereabouts, something had struck him from behind; it thickened his thoughts and paralyzed his energies. He had struck out for help, mouthing a prayer inwardly that this might be the end of all things for him physically as much as morally. Perhaps that weak

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lean of his spirit towards the unknown had been the feature in his defence which had played him into the hands of his enemies. They had seemed to him a small multitude standing there in the dark corner of the ruelle, back of the Launoy residence, crossing towards the main avenues. The blows had descended thick and fast. He had fought desperately, with his arms and fists, conscious that he was outnumbered; aware, too, of an intense lethargy of spirit. Then he had melted into a space where, ultimately, from oblivion, he had awakened to confront mildewed walls, a horrid, vindictive, olive-skinned face, what seemed years of maze-like effort to be free, an effort which never materialized, and at length the plaintive features of a white-capped Sister of Mercy; then his mother—and then! Life had beckoned him on. Weakly he had reached forth for it, not knowing that with it must come the sick unrest, the old torment, this anguish for the unforbiddable! Oh, just God, was this Life, then—this eternal war against what *is*?

He spoke, but so hoarsely she was obliged to lean forward to listen.

“They were footpads. Mariotti headed them. I was intent upon getting back to the station to complete my scheme. They struck me down.”

She had both hands before her eyes. She was shuddering.

He let his glance fall upon her now. Those famished eyes never left off looking for quite forty seconds. Then they steadily, as though dragged mercilessly by some unseen force, looked away.

“You are kind to have pitied me,” she heard him say distinctly, in a far-off sort of voice, some moments later.

“And that is all?”

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"All," he answered.

"And it was my fault?"

"No."



CHAPTER XLI

THE SIGN AT THE CROSS-ROADS

THE Ambassador began looking in more frequently. He brought a message from Burgess. The surveyor had requested the honor of an interview with the comrade he had so unstintedly mourned ; whose untimely fate he obstinately accused himself of having provoked. Upon Conway's acquiescence he stumbled in one night, his hard old face quivering. They, one and all, retired precipitately upon catching sight of those working features. After a silent moment, in which the surveyor drew his cuff across his eyes, and Conway pulled a coverlet up over his emaciated frame, Burgess muttered doggedly,—

"I felt in me bones that yer were meant to push the thing through, Mister Jack, an' so ye will. The game is ours. We have the whip-hand. That chalk stratum crosses the border, God be praised ! Yer Frenchman won't hev a word to say for hisself."

The surveyor's moist eyes were eloquent, his cap in his hand ; his coarsely shod feet shuffled in and out against one another, as of old. Burgess was leaving France for America. His plan of the Carembourg lands reposed, neatly rolled, under Conway's palm on the table between them.

"I will come along, too, after the trial," said Conway.

"Right ye are, sir. Ye're not made fur the cumpaniunship uv these 'ere furriners. They're, the entire kit and boodle uv 'em, a rum lot."

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Conway asked to see the Ambassador privately that evening. His request was granted. The two friends sat and chatted far into the night.

Conway began soberly, his eyes cast down, his fingers knotting restlessly the fringe of the knit coverlet under which he reclined.

"I owe you an apology," he said, "for not strictly obeying orders."

"How so?"

Conway suddenly recognized that he was dealing with a lawyer. The Ambassador's tone expressed clearer than his words that he had reserved judgment until an enlightenment was proffered.

"I had no business to go up to Paris, when you had sent me to Carembourg."

"Why did you go?"

The Ambassador's eyes met the invalid's.

"I went," returned Conway, "because we had seen, or rather Burgess had reported having seen that day, Lamballe himself."

"Ah!" The Ambassador's face brightened involuntarily.

"I thought to confirm his absence or presence, in Paris, would facilitate our search."

"How so?"

"In case of his absence from Carembourg, the time to pursue, unmolested, our scheme. In the case of his presence there, to discontinue it."

"Paris," remarked Markoe, drily, "is a large city."

"Yes."

"You found Lamballe?"

"I found him. If it had not been for Mariotti, you understand, I would have accomplished my object, and followed up our errand."

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"Yes," acquiesced the Ambassador, quietly, "I understand."

"I made a botch of it, Stephen. I knew I should. I was a green hand, and did not take sufficient precautions."

"No," returned Markoe, smoking placidly, "the necessary precautions were lacking."

"I wish my first encounter could have been attended with more success."

"Success," vouchsafed the Ambassador, "registers no more or less than the accident of averted failures."

"You think so?" earnestly. The invalid's pallid looks belied somewhat his recent querulous statement that he had strength enough to push matters through swiftly now, in order to make up for lost time.

"There are two classes of men. The men who succeed and those who fail," he continued, dejectedly.

"Pardon me," intercepted Markoe. "There is but one kind—the kind who make mistakes."

"Perhaps, with Burgess's plan to help me, I may be able to induce Lamballe to reverse his decision, when he becomes sufficiently convinced that it is for France's good," the young fellow went on more hopefully.

Conway had not learned his chief's opinion as regarded the delay his own unfortunate disappearance had compelled. Neither did he ever know that there had been some sharp reproofs administered through the home office—reprimands which deplored the Ambassador's incomprehensible passive policy.

"I selected you as my assistant," remarked Markoe later. He had risen to go. The invalid, in spite of his protest, had gotten up to accompany his guest to the door. "I think I have not been mistaken in you."

"In spite of events having proved to the contrary?"

"They have proved nothing as yet. We have been

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balked. That is not frustration. I told the President that the man required for the Carembourg mission must, in acquiring the diplomacy the issue demanded, make three elements evident."

"And those?" eagerly, the young neck craned forward, the dark eyes in their gaunt frame—they had taken on an almost abnormal brilliancy in the past second—frankly anxious.

"Silence first, conscientious concentration next, and a master makeshift."

"And?"

"The silence has been yours ; the conscientious concentration is yours. The master makeshift——?"

There was a pause. Jack stretched out his hand. The Ambassador shook it a trifle awkwardly. Madeleine Farragut's only son was an oddly emotional specimen. He lit another cigar.

"You say that after the trial you are going home to strike out for a career," he said. "I am glad to hear that. You have good stuff in you : steel, mercury, and iron. It may be of use for you to know that there is an inscription printed on the mile-stone that commands my cross-roads. It is my best friend. I was young once ; I had big, strong dreams ; I thought I could control the undercurrent. Unlike you, however, I was poor. I remember now successful men, for me, never seemed possessed of any element of lasting charm. The strugglers alone roused my interest. They meant fiber. The idlers signified pulp. Of course, in those days, I was intolerant. Perhaps I am still, but not so much as I was. You were pulpy, young one, when I came upon you, shreddy fabric dyed in the loom ; main faults surplus everything ; surplus luxury, surplus overfeeding. They warp and choke up. Grit can't assimilate in such quarters. You had, in spite

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of this, energy enough to aspire to something different. Something different is what beckons men on in battle, within the range of the enemy's guns. Something different is the eagle screech of our nation."

"What was the inscription on that mile-post, Stephen?"

The Ambassador let his grey eyes fall upon the strained face at his side. His own softened a trifle.

As they did so Conway remembered, with a tightening of his pulse which was involuntary, that this man might not live more than his allotted share of three score years and ten.

"Stephen," he interpolated impetuously,—the memory of the sin for which his blood had burned now flared up and scorched his eloquent face,—"I would like to tell you something."

A mighty light blazed in the Ambassador's neutral eyes. It glowed widely; then it vanished. He pointed, with one finger, at the clock.

"You are only convalescent, young one," he remarked, good-humoredly. "That, remember, is but a partial cure. It sometimes lets in fever, and even delirium. You are weak still. We must not go backwards. Our cause is almost won."

There was a cheerier note in his vibrant voice than Conway ever remembered having remarked before.

"If we can win," continued Markoe, "without too great an expenditure of superfluous force, it will only be the beginning of many victories for you."

Conway did not speak. He stood regarding him with glittering eyes. The Ambassador pulled on his overcoat. He fastened the buttons of his gloves. It was early spring, and the nights were cold.

"What is the inscription on your mile-post?"

"Ah! I had forgotten. Odd," with a little irrepressible

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chuckle. "It may seem Greek to you. It won't always. Remember that; *it won't always*. Perhaps it may discourage you now," with a sudden frown. "But, no; I think not. It is full of pith. It is, in any case, a good enigma to work out. Anglo-Saxon is the finest, most convincing language in the world, if understood cleverly."

"And the words?"

"Failure is opportunity."



CHAPTER XLII

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CULTURE of the higher instincts has at times been known to subdue even the impulse of self-preservation. The so-called lower classes, however, rejoice in exercising their individual prerogative practising the old-fashioned theory of vengeance. To those of the inner brotherhood behind the scenes of professional retaliation, the exercise of which brings them close to human depravity, an original scheme of revenge is not only considered the natural sequence of familiarity with the ungodly, but the imperative just claim of any individual who has been wrongfully—in the pursuit of executing justice—misunderstood.

Lubin, glowing with the sense of his own importance, had been attacked in his most vulnerable portion when Mariotti had turned on him, under the eyes of the gaping mob, who instinctively up to this regarded the renowned detective as a king of power, and, smarting with his own wrongs, had set his fangs alongside his hand. He had left a bigger wound than the mangled flesh revealed; a moral sore which suppurated, and plead for vengeance long after

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the outward manifestation of the clown's venomous spite was healed. In a word, according to Lubin's private conviction, that attack of the clown had nailed the final screw in his coffin.

Under any circumstances the eminent official would have felt no pity for the miserable creature whom he had brought to justice ; sympathy dies an easy death in the face of the callousness of human kind. If there is honor between thieves, the quality of mercy is an exploded fantasy among detectives. But without that attack upon Lubin's person, which made him for the time being the under dog, Mariotti might have gotten off with his life.

Attempted manslaughter cannot prove just cause for guillotining, especially when the patient, alive and well, rejoices in his health and high spirits under the glad eyes of his numerous friends and acquaintances, as did young Conway.

Lubin knew this. Inasmuch, however, as he had privately resolved that the clown should suffer for his irreverence, he lent all his powers towards bringing him now to a final punishment. The law which precluded the total extinction which Lubin so rabidly desired was known as the Berenger law. Its chief quality was mercy. It preached against malevolence, while at the same time according a long rein to the sinner who could prove he had never sinned before. Mariotti would have been sent up for life had it not been for Berenger. That law-maker had it down in the code of public morals that unless a law-breaker has committed a former proven crime, his punishment shall be mitigated. The clause which thus attenuated justice; read the plea of extenuating circumstances. Impulse, it argued, might have been excuse for a first offence, or ignorance. A second or third delinquency, Berenger claimed, alone confirmed a settled bent towards guile,—in which

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case the hardened sinner must pay the full penalty of the law.

So Lubin, cognizant of every shade and grade of Gallic municipal mechanism, had set to work, during those long months pending Conway's convalescence, to unearth the Gascon's earlier methods of living.

It was with great glee that he finally discovered, in the course of his manifold exercise of personal spite, the fact of Mariotti's perpetual leaning towards iniquity, and its public registration. He came across this plethoric circumstance one day in April, when his courage was almost exhausted, and his personal venom was dying out for lack of sustenance.

He had been running his forefinger along the police register of five years since, when his practised eyes encountered the pithy relation of an anarchist, a Gascon of meridional temperament and great personal magnetism, who had, on the sunny slopes of the Riviera, grown so in love with oblique methods that he had formed a gang of political cutthroats, which had finally been arrested for instigating a miniature, badly-organized revolution. The leader had ultimately been proven guilty of almost every sin known in the socialistic rogues' calendar. The little company had been collectively brought to justice, and made to pay the penalty of their crime singly, with the exception of their captain whom, it was quoted, possessed the skin of the proverbial leopard and the subterfuges of the flea. It was related that this Gascon, a man with olive skin and a pair of shifting eyes, was possessed of limbs of rubber, and muscles so capitally trained that he had been known to utilize them to leap as far and as high as a greyhound, and to edge himself through the narrowest apertures like a snake. His name was Antonio Mario. He had, up to now, escaped capture.

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He was wanted chiefly for having assassinated an old woman in the suburbs of Nice. She had been found strangled to death, her treasure box rifled, her body hideously mutilated and burned.

In a later report the statement was printed that Mario had been seen in Paris, haranguing a gang of anarchists in a cellar in the vicinity of Montmartre. When set upon by the police, his assistants had turned State's evidence to procure their own release, and had proclaimed their leader to be a notorious brigand who had miraculously escaped the penalty of the law. In one case his band had been captured. In the other they had gotten off scot-free through the machinations of their deliverer, who was no less than Mariotti himself—he at that time having put into play a sleight-of-hand trick which momentarily turned the attention of the pursuing party from their prey—the entire gang escaping, to the extreme discomfiture of the pursuers. This affair had been hushed up, since it could not lay claim to edifying the community at large.

As Lubin read his face broadened. He copied some notes on his cuff. He made off unctuously to the Prefet de Police, from whose private office he emerged later, with an expression upon his countenance which contained a suspicion of malice. Lubin was indubitably a great man in his sphere, but the glow which now set fast in his spirit savored not a little of an inferior's satisfaction at having accomplished the noble act, not entirely disinterested, of having rid the famous public of a pest.

Lubin rooted out slowly the long list of his crimes. When he concluded, not a flaw was to be found in the circlet of proof which was to bind in his chosen enemy.

That night the detective went home and slept the sleep of the just, the first restful repose he had had for five months.

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Proceedings were begun some weeks before Conway had entirely recovered.

The court-room was packed to the doors. Naturally the affair attracted widespread attention. In the colony it was whispered that Conway would give important evidence. The Ambassador's name was mentioned as being, through some mysterious complication, connected with the case.

Comment was made that he attended the trial daily and with interest watched the slow development of Mariotti's delinquencies which unrolled with increasing evidence of a lurid talent for extracting iniquity from every corner of life.

The prisoner regarded the affair as an advertisement. He had been ushered into court the first day shambling and chattering ; his skin of a shocking pallor, wasted with confinement, a gibbering, curse-corroded, dungeon-haunted, human reptile. But as the weeks rolled by his manner became cocksure. He occupied again the position he had lost, that of the spoiled child of the public. The world's applause was the fillip to Mariotti's spirit that the cry of "coo-ee" is to a colonial.

So that when the summing up took place, and the next to the last day came and Conway walked into the court to give evidence, Mariotti looked his own affair in the face with the delighted expectancy of a child, who, although having committed a wrong, considers his guilt as but a fair sample of his art.

Human nature, in spite of its vows to the contrary, submits to the undoing of its fellows with admirable calm.

The doors of the court-room had swung wide that morning at eight o'clock. There was expectancy in the atmosphere. If the crowd of gamins at the entrance had not been beaten off by stern officials, the fact of an affair of vast importance would have already declared itself, in the

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exaggerated exercise of authority which these minions of the law seldom lent to the discussion of a plot less promising of piquante disclosures.

The great and small journalists by ten A.M. had taken their places in the gallery. Ten minutes later the stenographers sat in a row, their papers and pencils neatly prepared on a flat table which stood before them.

A sprinkling of notabilities began to file in.

There was Conway, looking taller than ever in his frock coat, pale, aristocratic, carrying a cane on which he leaned heavily as he entered. He chatted from time to time with his mother, who was seated directly behind him, accompanied by a distinguished looking individual, who some one up in "haute aristocratie" details whispered loudly was "the illustrious dramatist, Ferdinand Lamballe."

There was the United States Ambassador, and beautiful Mrs. Markoe very wan and frail looking after her recent illness. There was the Austrian princess, and after a time the English Ambassador dropped in with the Swedish attaché. Above everything to the gossiping gang, which had prayed for, bought, and stolen an entrance, there was Marguerite, Duchesse de Launoy, in a gown which set all the little pension frequenters, and those upstarts for place with which Paris abounds, into ecstasies over its simplicity.

Mariotti's features worked violently as he recognized that the affair had by this almost taken on the dignity of a coronation, or a first night. There was the bustle coincident with a great event which he had never been equal to withstanding, when those aristocrats he professed to despise acclaimed him as a god in his sphere. His crest-fallen mood vanished. He began to feel as though the sun once more penetrated his turgid fancy. In the gloom of his prison it had sickened and snarled at the approach of an unpremeditated doom. It now leaped with joy at the

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sight of his victim, grinningly aware within of how much he had been able to make the miserable upstart suffer. He forgot past waste hours wherein the innocent recipient of his cruelty had writhed in impotent agony, past brutality towards the guiltless and the oppressed, even the determination to drain from the fortunate his merited socialistic realization of equality. Conway exemplified, to this exaggerated specimen of speculative instincts, the best investment he had ever made. The Ambassadors he even now, chucklingly, was laughing at in his sleeve for having accorded him a glimpse of that naiveté of the spotless and exalted which he had never approached, so nearly, to his own advantage. He wondered—coiling mentally, as he did so, a cobra preparing to sting with his forked tongue in two places at once—if the racy chance would be proffered wherein he might prove Conway's impertinence at dealing irreverently with an individual of his prominence, and to strike the Ambassador where he knew his soreness lay—a weakness which tickled Mariotti in his profoundest unfaith—the feminine sex.

Markoe sat contemplating the wriggling rascal with his customary calm. His face was drawn and worn. If he experienced any uneasiness that his wife's entanglement with the case might be revealed, thus lending her to being torn to pieces by the wolves of public opinion, he gave no evidence of it.

The proceedings began after the usual preliminaries had been gone through with and dismissed. They comprised—with a list of the prisoner's delinquencies, which the reader of the morning's legal chapter pronounced superfluous in the present issue, a treatment which made Mariotti, who had suddenly turned his old hideous pallor, relax once more—Lubin's account of his pursuit of the clown, coincident upon his discovery that he was leading a dual existence.

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He explained that Mariotti had roused his suspicions by instituting inquiries as regarded the Ambassador's financial status.

The detective pictured graphically, to Mariotti's visible edification, his own participation in the clown's daily life from that on. He was an interesting study as he stood there, every impression he received faithfully worked out in his vivid countenance. Concisely he depicted the rise of the Gascon who, with such lightning speed, had steadily advanced in his genius for vice, his saintly back in its shiny frock coat turned towards the object of his detestation, his chubby profile expressively delighted at last at being instrumental in bringing the wily criminal before his accusers in his true character, while he related his story.

The judge checked him as, garrulously, he attempted to gather up the threads of Mario's past life and fasten them with the present imbroglio.

"That will do. Vous avez le temps, allez," said he. "For the present we must keep close to the issue at hand."

Conway was seated with his eyes cast down. It had required all his force to put from him the delicious knowledge that the Ambassadors, singly and faithfully, had sought to save him from the cruel sequel of his own temerity. The burden she had carried for him served to soften somewhat the bitter sense of failure which, he had assumed, must hereafter always be his portion. He had not learned as yet that the consciousness of weakness often proves a strength in itself. He only knew that he had been flabby in the one effort of his life wherein he should have been most strong. But he should ever hug to himself, he knew, the sweet knowledge that she had fought for him, with all her woman's wit during those long, slow, tortuous weeks when she might have spoken—had she not, too, pitied him.

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Now, when Lubin's story led him to read between the lines an evasion of the main circumstance which had brought his own sufferings to light—that circumstance which made all those cognizant of Kate Markoe's confusion bend their gaze everywhere except upon her flushed face—Conway glanced involuntarily at her.

In that look he received his most acute punishment for past neglect of Markoe's interests or possible sufferings. Kate Markoe's sad eyes were fixed upon her husband's face. As Lubin pursued his story, the court hanging breathlessly on the smallest detail dished up so generously for their special delectation, she forgot time, place, her own pride, as she strove to imprint upon her heart forever the features of the man whose love she had been powerless to keep. And justly. She recognized, perhaps with undue severity, how unworthy she had been of this specimen of manhood who in simplest fashion asked but to do his duty.

If Stephen Markoe had turned at that instant this story would have concluded here. But he did not turn; thus he missed seeing in his wife's fair face a truth which stabbed Conway in his direst need, and left him inexorably crippled.

The past few weeks had dragged along wearily for the Ambassador and his wife. A widening gulf yawned between them. He had bidden her wait. She had waited. She would wait until the trial had been consummated. But what a waiting! A veritable sword of Damocles hung over her head suspended by a single hair—the hair of Time. One touch of her husband's will and it would fall, cutting her off forever from the greatest gift life had offered her. Painfully—only Kate Markoe knew how painfully—it was coming home to her that she had been her own undoing.

It was Conway's turn to mount the witness-stand. The audience whispered volubly as he climbed to his place.

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This had been the intended victim of Mariotti's venom. He had not died—by the grace of God! “What a pity if he had,” thought a pretty matron in the audience with a taste for romance.

“The night was dark,” stated Conway, briefly. “I was bewildered by the glare in the Hotel Launoy, whither I had gone to attend the ball of the season. I ran out from under the canopy, spread over a temporary conservatory erected for the occasion, in order to catch my train for Carembourg, where I had been stopping. It was a half hour to the Gare de Lyons. I lifted my hand to call a cab when I suddenly felt as if I had been hit by some blunt instrument from behind. I had met Mariotti earlier in the evening. He was in costume; a fantastic figure enough, reeling down the Champs Elysées, singing a popular song. It was imperative I should visit the Hotel Launoy that evening.” He paused a moment; his lips whitened. He saw the Ambassador's face as in a mist, with its brave eyes and grave mouth. Then he went on, but in that instant he wondered sharply if men realize that one night's work may mar their hope of peace, present and future. He had seen, as he spoke, the Ambassadors turn and look at him, as though striving instinctively to beg him to pass over this portion of his story as swiftly as possible. “She seeks to protect him this time,” he thought, bitterly, then he dismissed the thought as unworthy and dashed on. “They struck me from the back. There seemed a number of them, but as I turned in their midst I saw Mariotti, grinning fearfully. He said something, the import of which I did not catch as I raised my hand to ward off his furious blow. Then I knew no more, but before I fell I saw him strike. I remember now that what he said was ‘à bas les aristocrats.’

“Everything was a blank until I woke in that fetid

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chamber, and saw Mariotti standing over me like an avenging devil, with a glass of some brown liquid in his hand. He told me to drink it. I, struggling against an overpowering sense that all was not well with me, complied. There is no need to enlarge upon the further details of my confinement," he added, shortly—the woman who was listening, her heart almost rent asunder, her brain distracted, knew the intonation was pitiful in the extreme—for her sake ; not for Mariotti's.

Conway seated himself heavily, to the great chagrin of some ignorant persons in the court room, who were gazing awe-stricken at the young millionaire's costly watch chain with its seal, on which was inscribed an iron hand in a velvet glove. They had been, too, somewhat amused at his guarded French, which, although accurate, was far from fluent.

The accused, during his victim's statement, had sat vacuously grinning at the ceiling with the resigned smile of a wrongfully accused member of a higher civilization.

Some witnesses were brought in. They recounted in no guarded terms a grewsome tale of Mariotti's cruelty towards his comrades. Then that morning's proceedings terminated. The court adjourned.



CHAPTER XLIII

MARIOTTI'S DEFENCE

THE trial dragged along for weeks. Gradually the main theme thickened, what with the aid of some able police commissioners and their investigations, inspired by Lubin.

Paris journalism gleefully seized upon Mariotti's downfall as its personal opportunity. It had sung Mariotti songs and danced Mariotti waltzes *ad libitum*. It now chanted his

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dirge, embellishing it with feats of journalistic skill consisting of gigantic sub-heads which, attached to lurid sheets, were strewn from the Batignolles to Notre Dame. Just as Paris had gone Mariotti-mad one day, not long since, repeating his mots as indication of the acme of gamin philosophy, now it jeered mercilessly at his downfall.

Miniature harlequins were sold like hot cakes at little booths erected temporarily for the purpose on the boulevards. When the startling news had been put in circulation that, having been discovered guilty of the murder of an old woman near Nice, which had taken place some five years before, the murderer was to pay the full penalty of his crime, the delight of the public knew no bounds in anticipation of their fallen idol's last unexpected performance.

The prisoner had thought that his sentence would be light, in view of the fact that Conway lived and flourished ; but one day the prison warden wore so outspoken an expression of gratification that Mariotti, acutely susceptible to physiognomics, surprised it, and asked the cause.

His keeper regarded him curiously through the slits of his evil eyes.

"You had better begin to pray," he said, facetiously. "Your time is short" ; and then, as Mariotti shrieked, leaping to his feet like a galvanized viper, his cold-blooded informant told him he must answer to his Maker in the old form,—a life for a life !

"Look to yourself," he muttered, touching the wriggling rascal at his feet with the toe of his boot,—he had fallen inert after rending the air with his curses,—"when the day of your trial is at hand say what you have to say boldly. It will be your last chance."

It had been pouring hard all night. The rain still fell in torrents. The reflection from the black wet roofs outside

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cast over the presiding judge's lined countenance a dark smirk of what seemed like diabolical glee to the accused's inflamed fancy.

The throng buzzed angrily, at last rendered conscious of the poisonous instincts of the viper they had been cherishing in their midst. The corridors were congested with gendarmes, spiked bayonets carried stiffly against their right shoulders. They stood in bodies, lined together at the heads of the staircases, beating off from time to time the surging mob, which threatened to storm their ranks, divided so as to effect an egress for the principal witnesses.

The air was stifling ; the silence intense. Mariotti had been declared guilty. He had been asked if he had any plea to advance whereinsoever the full penalty of the law should not be meted out to him.

In his mind's eye the now more than ever notorious criminal had been witnessing all night an arid square at Nancy, in which a wooden-beamed guillotine stood forth against the slowly pinkening four A.M. sky. He had been an urchin on a neighboring roof at dawn years since, no god in view but the god of his own riotous inclination. He remembered now, fearfully, what he had then witnessed gleefully, having craned his neck from dark until dawn, awaiting mercilessly the passing of the condemned.

A little body of sombre-clad men ; a sad-eyed priest reading in monotone the prayers for the dying ; a limp, horror-stricken creature with leaden eyes and blanched skin, remorselessly marched towards that scaffolding of doom.

And he had pitched his cap above his tousled head, in silent ecstasy that it was his portion to obtain a glimpse of so ravishing a spectacle !

To-day he had been dragged into court, his senses sick

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with the grisly ghoulishness his imagination lent them. Now, as he stumbled to his feet to make his plea, he crossed himself, a gesture his confessor had taught him the night before when, refusing to repent, the sinner had only crouched gibbering in the corner of his cell emitting godless imprecations. He realized he was about to taste for the last time the delicious pastime of holding a multitude spell-bound by force of personal magnetism.

For Mariotti, as he stood there, a pitiable object enough, his long, oily, unkempt hair falling to his shoulders, his faintly copper-colored features criss-crossed with terror, still stood sponsor for the leashed spirit of the masses.

He thought now, exultantly,—the conviction flitted across his confused brain and cleared away the cobwebs of that too much thinking which makes men mad,—that not one of his accusers, not the Duchesse with her following of worldlings, nor Lamballe, supreme in his marked emphasis of reiterated power, nor Conway, wearing what seemed to the miserable wretch a triumphant smile over Mariotti's justifiable end, could do as much. He might be the mountebank, the assassin, the proved most iniquitous instigator of other men's crimes : none the less he had always been a master in his line. These beings fraught with the courage which a full pocket-book engenders, these pampered creatures odoriferous of luxury, whose gorgeously caparisoned steeds champed their bits outside, whose servants in livery stood behind them with the block-like expression assumed by the hired underling, never had tasted one corner of life as Mariotti knew it. Theirs had not been the hand-to-hand encounter with reality ; theirs, in all likelihood, would never be the fisticuff tussle for existence. They were rocked on a summer sea of idleness or prosperity ; their dreams were stuffed with sawdust. They mistook it for flesh and blood. They knew no more

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of the real article, what with the polish exacted by their senses, than the French dolls in the Passage des Panoramas. Mariotti knew, though. He had lain with his ear close to human nature. He had heard it throb. He had seen it with his own eyes. He had felt with his own senses all the upheavals, the struggles, the ceaseless gnashing of teeth of that stratum which men name of the lower class, but which Mariotti truthfully claimed to exemplify the majority.

Thus, charged with a brief semblance of grit which flamed up mightily for the moment, burning out in this the last outspoken moment of his life all conscience or sense of responsibility, he spoke. And his listeners, astounded, lifted their faces in wonder as the prisoner swayed there, lightly poised on his long, slender feet, teaching these, the advertised apostles of order, Mariotti's creed.

"I will answer him first," he said, almost facetiously, indicating Conway, who was regarding the prisoner from a distance. "That foreigner came to me, monsieur le Juge, to borrow my costume! Why did he not dare then to appear in his own? He was no less a man than I—and all men are harlequins where they are not fools. Mariotti went as the harlequin Mariotti. Not so the more aristocratic of the Duchesse's guests. In all that distinguished assembly the night of the Launoy fête Mariotti was the only man who dared proclaim himself as himself. The others, lords and ladies of high degree, princes, barons, counts, dukes, went the way of all flesh,—to deceive. The clown, and the clown alone, took his character in his hand, a custom with Mariotti, and scampered through the throng as ever, their spoiled child. Young America came to me, and asked of me my costume! 'Twas like asking the leopard for his skin. Know then, messieurs, the costume

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Mariotti is not the costume of tout le monde ; neither is it the invention of any fourth-class costumier who ekes a living stealing other men's ideas. It is the original creation of this brain," beating his forehead with his hand. "It evolved from this heart," striking his side. "The hypocritical intent, then, of him you choose to denominate my 'victim' becomes thus apparent ; n'est-ce-pas ? The American went to the ball to represent *me*. He went as a lie. Now I am human, monsieur, and I could have slain him for seeking to despoil me of a fame I had taken years to establish. For what I had sought after, starved for, and finally accomplished, he, that miserable upstart from a country nous autres ignore, obtained in one night. And not he alone, the American, but also our illustrious friend, the great Lamballe. Know then, messieurs, that in that famous night Mariotti was at the ball three times—for Lamballe went as Mariotti, and the American, and Mariotti, a triple evidence of superior proficiency. Three times lord of all !"

There was a low excited murmur from the rapt audience.

The judge knocked with his gavel upon his desk, peremptorily. "Silence !" he commanded.

The clown continued, his left hand had crept to his hip ; it rested there in the graceful poise which this abortionist of simplicity had made so peculiarly his own. His left was lifted to gesticulate in Mariotti's individual fashion. When making a point he laid one finger against his nose ; when scoring a victory he snapped two digits in the air ; upon the acknowledgment of defeat he turned one hand out with the palm upwards, slyly observing the expression of every countenance upturned to him, hissing, now in a sibilant whisper, now in a soft, musical, peculiarly mellifluous lisp, through his broken, darkened teeth.

"The second question is, have I anything to say why

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the extreme penalty of the law should not be passed upon me? Yes, I have this to say. In meting out a just punishment to the American I only paid him back in his own coin. He dispossessed me of my character. It was but meet I should despoil him of his life. He stole from me what was dearer than life—if only for an hour—with an insouciance, mais, with an insouciance which was to me a model of its kind! My answer to the American, monsieur, is that there are things nous autres have which a rich man may not buy. The art of creativeness for one thing—the right to administer a just punishment when we so will.”

Crime upon crime being proved against him, he received the crushing evidence of his guilt nonchalantly, ending thus,—

“What have I to say that death should not be meted out to me in return for my sins? I have this to say. Who are ye that ye should mete out death to me? Are ye less self-seeking, or less clowns than I? I say no! You dare to judge me by what I do not see. You claim to be better men than I. I, a professional clown, doubt it. Why, then? Because I have lived, messieurs, lived every inch of my life, royally lived it. Men have not lived until they have suffered, say ye? I have suffered. Men have not lived until they have loved, you claim? Well, then, I have loved, much and often, and I say that women love our love for them better than they love ourselves, and that men love us for what we teach them of evil. Men have not lived until they have hated. I hate!”

His lips were drawn now like a white cord across his teeth; his hand still pressed convulsively against his hip; it was creeping furtively towards a slit in his pocket.

“Men have not lived until they have killed! Who of us, I ask, has not killed?” his strident voice now rising to a hoarse shriek. “You!” pointing with his slim, shaking

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finger at the judge. "You !" denoting Conway. "You shake your heads. Fools !" Some foam now could be seen at the corners of the criminal's mouth ; his eyes held curious forked lights like those of a snake. "Do you not kill, then, when you bid men like me cease to hope, when you kick a cur into silence, or torture a hag with neglect ? What have I to say ? This ! Who are you in comparison with Mariotti ! Are you better than he ? He has ruled ; he has gloried in infamy. You have knuckled down. Cowards ! I have lived. You have looked on. I have played my rôle openly. You play your rôle secretly. I claim I am the better man of the two. You name me a 'clown' because I have danced and juggled, because I have sinned and suffered, because even now I laugh in the face of defeat, because I show my teeth instead of cringing at life like those low curs that pinch their tails between their flanks, and go off yelping to hide themselves in the garbage heap where they belong. You are more clowns than I. I have loved life. You tremble at it. You fear death. Know then—I defy it !"

His grey lips were drawn tight across his broken teeth. His eyes glazed. Then they fixed in a rapturous stare, as they were lifted towards the ceiling. The audience looked upwards. It saw nothing but an angular-shaped sunbeam, which sifted through the half-open casement, and shot unevenly across the dirty wall. Mariotti's eyes fixed glassily against this evidence of God's bounty. His body worked convulsively.

"I say I defy death," he shrieked. "Let it come. I am not afraid."

There was a brief pause, and a long, shuddering, rattling breath.

A police commissioner, who had stood stolidly at the back of the witness-box, now started hurriedly forward.

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It was too late. He had seen the narrow flash of a steel instrument which the clown swiftly drew from his hip pocket. With a lightning-like gesture, supreme in its record of unparalleled grace and energy, he had pointed it directly at his own heart. When he withdrew it, it was red with blood.

Mariotti fell, an inert mass, across the railing of the witness-box.

As they lifted him, he murmured some words which were handed down afterwards to rogue posterity as evidence of a courage which, in certain circles, became immortal.

"*Bien aimée la Mort,*" he had whispered, "*tu es la bienvenue.*"



CHAPTER XLIV

THE ULTIMATUM

THE Ambassador, Lamballe, and Conway made their way direct to the Embassy the night of their return from the La Vallière fête. It had been extended by the greatest lady in France to her circle of aristocratic acquaintances to announce an international engagement of note in her superb domain. It was a day of splendor which for unparalleled hospitality was unforgettable.

The three gentlemen had agreed tacitly to re-open the Carembourg issue that night, and to dismiss it, one way or the other.

As they seated themselves, Lamballe looked brilliantly capable of conducting his own campaign with verve, the Ambassador's lips were firmly compressed in a horizontal line, and Conway's sensitive face was flushed. They had

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returned to town with the other one hundred and fifty of Madame de Launoy's illustrious guests, in a chartered train. They were now closeted, no more formidable weapon in sight than a globe of the world, which Lamballe contemplated with glistening eyes at the point which revealed the quadrangular map of France.

The Ambassador, offering a brief apology, stood with his back to Lamballe and his step-son-to-be, opening some letters which his secretary had handed him as he passed out of the room at a sign from Markoe. Conway rolled a cigarette between his long nervous fingers. He had proffered his cigarette-case to Lamballe, who had declined partaking of its contents with an impatient frown. The Parisian broke forth hastily, as though desirous of bringing matters to a head without further ado.

"I have but one answer. You know it. Let us terminate this matter here, devoid of bad blood, mes amis."

The Ambassador did not turn. His thumb nail neatly inserted itself between the pointed flap of an envelope and the cover. There was the thin, sharp sound of paper tearing. Then it stopped.

Conway sat forward. The two lines between his eyes deepened. He crossed one knee over the other, brought a closed fist down upon the upper one noiselessly, the lighted cigarette pinched between the first and second fingers of his hand, and said, lifting his other scooped palm to the back of his neck,—

"We don't ask any better than to hear your side of the question from your own lips, Lamballe. Up to the present that opportunity has been denied us."

"I told Monod," began Lamballe, with a surprised look.

"Pardon me. I had not finished. From your own lips, I repeat. We don't know any better way than that.

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We don't do business from any other standpoint. We are a democratic nation, remember. It is our habit to deal with serious difficulties at close range. What, no doubt, is courtesy to you, seems to us impracticable. You are too square a man to wish to cripple us in our foremost principle."

"What is your 'foremost principle'?" icily.

"Straightforwardness." The retort direct was delivered with flashing eyes. Conway rose. He stuffed both hands obstinately into his pockets, after flinging his unsmoked cigarette into the grate.

Lamballe looked at him steadily. "No one could accuse you of lacking in that quality, monsieur."

"You mistake me. It is you whom I accuse."

Lamballe's features stiffened.

"Comment, monsieur!" he ejaculated, as though unable to trust the evidence of his senses.

His eyes were fixed, a hurt astonishment and a reluctant admission in their depths, on the stalwart young figure confronting him. His profoundest faith was courage. But youth—albeit enviable—is ruthless always, he thought.

"I refer to the sense of duty that forces men to meet and state their case shoulder to shoulder, instead of utilizing an underling to do their dirty work for them."

The Ambassador seated himself, his half-read letters held loosely in one hand. His eyes were fixed anxiously on Conway's flushed face. Conway continued, impetuously,—

"Strategy is bred in the bone with you, Lamballe, I allow; but to us of a quicker civilization the incomprehensible quantity is a man who renounces his individual prerogative to fight the enemy. You rail at other men's sins on the stage. Why don't you try your own hand in live quarters?"

"I am ready." The spur had evidently rent the quivering flesh.

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"It is time. It was time six months ago. It was time four years since."

Lamballe lifted his hand imperiously. "You asked me here, then, not only to listen to your conditions, but to obey them?"

"We asked to meet you frankly and openly to state our case, which governs a generous mutual advancement for both parties concerned. You have eluded our advances. You have frustrated our efforts. You now announce your final decree as though we were children instead of men."

"What more do you require?"

"A clear statement of your reasons for declining our proposition."

"I am at a loss to understand your translation of my treatment of the matter. It is considered more diplomatic to treat through a third party, obviously, when the response is in the negative."

"We don't want diplomacy. State facts."

"You will have it?"

"Try us."

Lamballe rose. There was a dark, purple flush on both temples. The young voice acted like a saw on his torn prejudices, but he was a man of parts, and, with the justice for which he was proverbial, he extended the benefit of the doubt to his adversary.

He, too, as he put into words his personal feelings on the subject, recognized for the second time, in this its racy encounter with fresh air, his grievance's paramount discrepancy.

His ringing voice held a metallic note as he said, "I will not sell my home. May a man, then, tear his heart from his breast for daws to peck at? I say no. It were unworthy of himself, and our first duty is to ourselves.

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Why should I be required to throw myself as a burnt offering between two nations?"

"You are not suffering that highly sacrificial test. Your conduct is redolent of autocracy."

The daring words were dauntlessly delivered. The purple stain on Lamballe's temples was reflected more brightly in his antagonist's glowing lips and cheeks. Markoe sat forward, an unobserved spectator. His features looked as though hewn in marble. His mouth was unreadable; his eyes flashed from face to face, craftily assiduous.

Lamballe began again as though he had not heard the impetuous interruption.

"We French respect our privacy. This seems, no doubt, antediluvian to you of a less sensitive organism, but so it is. Had you inherited, as I have, race, an old name, and a vast principality, you might comprehend why the born imperialist is far more radical than the made one."

"A guardian of ancestral acres more faithful or more loving than the man who has earned place with the sweat of his brow! A free soil graduate with the world for arena possessed of a less emphatic sense of *meum et tuum* than the inheritor. I deny it. Your theory is untenable."

"You have the ignorance of youth,—and its impudence."

"And you the privilege of magnanimity,—which you renounce."

There was a live pause.

Lamballe continued hoarsely, his face fixed steadily towards the globe in front of him—the blue green quadrangular square dancing before his strained eyes like a blood spot on the sun. "Voyons! Here, then, is a sample of my love of home and country. You are aware of my revolt against everything connected with the Franco-

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Prussian war, yet rather than renounce one iota of my hatred for our enemy, I place myself, as it were, at the very gate of that heart-rending memory. It is crucifixion, *mais que voulez-vous?* When one's martyrdom is voluntary then alone is it bearable."

"You are a good hater," ejaculated Conway, with a responsive gleam in his eye; "but men, I am told, have done more through love."

His opponent sighed. He was too old and wise to gainsay truth.

"You claim you are advancing your country's interests. I claim you are defeating them. At last we are biting the bone of our contention."

"How am I 'defeating' them?" sarcastically, with an uncontrolled look of fury. "You are bold indeed, *mon-sieur*, to accuse Lamballe!"

"In your obstinate clutch of a voluntary martyrdom, you accord Prussia a right which, if you were the patriot you claim to be, you would throw your bleeding body into the gap before conceding."

Lamballe's features stiffened. His black eyes gleamed with an apprehensive light.

"I do not understand." The Parisian swung his hand around back of him unsteadily, drew forward a *fauteuil*, and fell into it.

Conway's face, for one instant, quivered sympathetically. His tone lost some of its incisive quality as he continued. "We offer you as rich a privilege as any yet backed by our government, and that is saying a great deal. The price is fair. Your deposit is the largest in the world. Our need is imperative. It is a pity that Prussia, to whose interest we are indifferent, should profit through your prejudice alone,—and by so doing excite France's bitter mortification."



"YOU ARE BOLD INDEED, MONSIEUR, TO ACCUSE LAMBALLE"

THE ULTIMATUM

Lamballe lifted his right hand, and drew it in a puzzled fashion across his brow. He was very pale. "I do not understand," he reiterated, huskily. "Explain, monsieur. Je vous en prie—explain."

"If we cannot convince you, we must deal with Prussia."

"What has she to do with it?" agitatedly.

"The chalk extends across the border, monsieur."

There was a dead silence. Then Lamballe said in a spent voice, extending his shaking fingers, "Proof?"

Conway walked towards the table, opened the drawer, and handed the roll containing Burgess's report to him without a word.

Lamballe unfolded it, his hands trembling violently.

"It would be like the irony of fate," remarked Conway colloquially, after a few moments, in which Lamballe had painfully perused the paper before him, folded it carefully, and replaced it upon the table.

The interim had registered but one slight sound. Brave men have released their hold on love and life with just such a sigh.

Lamballe's arm, which had hung limply over the back of his chair for the past few seconds, fell heavily to his knee. His eyes were fixed on vacancy. His features were contracted oddly. He wore the expression which stamped the countenance of that denouncer of treason who contemplated the murder of his son—a traitor—without the quiver of an eyelash.

"Prussia may not have it?" The voice was Conway's.

"No," came the response instantly, sharply resonant.

"She is the cancer in our national heart. She must not laugh at us—again. Bid your laborers come over. I will meet you half-way."

Conway walked across the room to where the Ambassador stood. He had risen. His back was towards his

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foreign guest. As Conway came towards him he looked up.

There is no sweeter foretaste of heaven than the "well done good and faithful servant" glimmer in the eyes of a friend.

"It has been like tearing out my heart," vouchsafed Lamballe an hour later, after the contract had been drawn up and signed. "I have been burned between two fires; hate and love. Surprisingly enough, they have both conquered here. I wonder, have you ever noticed in the tower at Carembourg, as you drove across the bridge that spans the moat, a queer oblong projectile imbedded in a wedge of plaster between the granite blocks? That shell came from the enemy's guns. Its shadow dwells in my heart."

The Ambassador contemplated his former antagonist imperturbably.

"I had heard you were noble even in defeat," he stated.

Lamballe shrugged his shoulders as he took up his hat.

"An exalted niche I may not fill," he protested, sadly.

"This is a case of '*faute de mieux*.'"

As he passed over the threshold, and the door closed behind him, Conway swung across the room, snatched his gripsack from a chair, placed his hat on his head, and extended his hand towards the Ambassador.

"Off?" inquired Markoe.

"More," returned Conway, very gravely. "Straight on, please God!"



MARKOE'S STORY

CHAPTER XLV

MARKOE'S STORY

IT was two A.M. Markoe had been just about to extinguish the light and cross the hall to his sleeping chamber to retire, when his wife entered, and closed the door softly behind her.

She was acting on an uncontrollable impulse.

Conway had gone. Already he was speeding towards Southampton. He had made off opportunely, jubilant, no doubt, over the triumph derived from his final interview with his country's immutable antagonist. He was eager to be doing ; of that she was certain. The cloud, which had been no bigger than a man's hand, had faded away from his horizon forever. Manlike, he had gotten off scot-free. She, the woman, remained to face the storm. The time had come for her to confirm her decision so daringly launched some months since.

As she stood hesitating—the Ambassador had risen, he was regarding her curiously—there suddenly sprang to life in her a great longing to rid her spirit of the burden which had been consuming her for weeks ; the secret of Conway's mad act, and her own guile. All her staunch support, as regarded her friend's weakness, vanished before her loyalty to the man who, so patiently, had borne with her whims, while knowing of her determination to leave him forever.

They stood face to face now, both abashed, both aware that the time had come when nothing stood between their solving of a problem which had rolled up, without their volition, on their hearthstone ; which only a mutual under-

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standing might once have put out, she thought. Even that hope was over now, though !

He considered, sadly, if he might have discovered some new method to win her love, this anguished hour had never been his. He had been a dolt to have supposed a woman might be won by either care or judgment. The complex creatures were beyond his ken.

She wondered, bitterly, why the embers of what she had intended should burn up into perpetual flame, had declared themselves so mercilessly, and so soon.

"I came here to tell you that I think the time has come, Stephen, in which to bid you good-bye," she began very quietly, in that hushed tone persons adopt when they know they are attacking a subject that contains elements which hitherto they have deemed it wiser to appear to ignore.

Wordlessly he confronted her. In after years they remembered that in that hour they had stood face to face, their limbs rigid, their hearts beating in dull, marked strokes that clutched fast at their breath and blanched their cheeks and lips.

He had no answer ready for her. A man may not plead in a moment like this. His pride or his reason, or both, forbid it. He felt all along that what was offered him he would accept gladly—did a Divine Providence will it that his lines should fall in pleasant places, instead of bald or shallow ones. But he could not demand the impossible. He knew love might or might not be. That when it is, it overflows all lesser things, and submerges pain and loss and grief in a tidal wave of bliss unspeakable. He knew when it is not, the famished land lies as though stricken by a pestilence, defunct !

"Before I go," she said,—the musical voice was very low and clear, the great mournful eyes wide and dry ; she

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was wept out, she thought, as she dimly wondered at her strange calm in this moment she had dreaded for so long,—
“I wish to tell you that in a measure I have deceived you.”

He raised his hand involuntarily, to bid her hush, but she continued steadily. “Don’t check me. In this confession which I consider it is my duty to make to you, I think you will discover *much* that will explain some ineptitudes in past matters which you have not imagined. But before I speak I want you to know that I will forgive you now and always, if you despise me for the weakness I am about to reveal. A man like you may not understand it. A woman would.”

She stirred a little restlessly. Then she went on.

He had folded his arms resignedly. He was looking at her intently.

“I think perhaps men do not imagine how women come to them when they marry,” she explained. “They have not—have they been as I was—loved before. They may not love again. They fancy that, with the marriage service, all desire to be appreciated, unless in their husband’s eyes, will be stilled forever. But after a time, when the first grade of matrimony is a thing of the past,—the first grade in which the woman gives all recklessly, voluntarily, and asks nothing in return, if she is wise, but present faith and like purity,—she comes into the consciousness that she is the same woman she was before she vowed herself forever to the being who may make her happiness or her undoing. She discovers herself guilty of the same old aspirations which assailed her girlhood, of the same weaknesses, of the identical capacities, especially so if life falls into the humdrum groove of daily events ; if she is made to feel it is but her duty to love, to honor, and to obey, I mean, if her steadfast allegiance is taken as a matter of course. That is where the shoe begins to pinch. This

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was the cause of my unrest in our case. I felt nothing I could do you would consider anything but the natural sequence of my vow to love, to honor, and to obey ; that the desire for admiration which I crushed out, the love of power which I renounced, the independence of letting my fancy flow towards the thing which promised it the most pleasure and the least pain, would be, in your estimation, comprised collectively in the correct translation of what is denominated conjugal duty. With women, as with men, the consciousness of doing right is not enough. We need the stimulus of our husband's approval ; the knowledge that he recognizes our self-denials. Otherwise we are no more than the truck horse that staggers on, daily more sodden, under the conviction that he is neither understood nor noticed. Hitherto I have been too proud or too impatient to tell you of this. I have only let out—in fits of temper, of which I have always afterwards felt bitterly ashamed—my conviction that you did not love me—at least, as other men love their wives. I know comparisons are odious—but there are things more odious. One of them is to reach out towards an unknown sphere, trusting to find within it what has been denied one elsewhere. That is a fault intrinsically womanly. It began with Eve.”

She stopped momentarily. Her words came so fast that she was obliged to check herself every now and then, as though to smooth out her reasoning and bring its meaning more forcibly to a point.

“I think it was because at home I always found you either intent upon a sort of aftermath of municipal affairs, or wearied with the day's doings, or impatient at my eagerness to find you as I once had found you, tender, attentive, that I gradually grew to demanding of others what you denied me—sympathy, and what seemed like complete

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understanding. It was an insignificant and perhaps unworthy detail upon which to wreck one's record of clear reasoning ; but there have been even more infinitesimal details utilized to widen the gap of woman's heart hunger—and with graver results. Things were at the stage I mention when you chose Jack Conway to come into our midst. He sympathized with my whims. He foresaw my wants. He was sunny ; he was not so absorbed with mental preoccupation that everything else escaped him, even the caprices of a woman who was nothing to him but his friend's wife. I don't think you can imagine what he became to me ; he was my comrade, my playmate, my advocate. He was the companion I had hungered for, and had not found in the place where I needed you. He did not scornfully rebuke my love of enjoyment. He encouraged it. He made up to me partially for what you denied. I did not see, at first, that I was doing him any harm. I was selfish. I could not consider that what to me was only a pastime was becoming to him his daily portion. I am sure he did not realize it, either, until that night came when all the truth flashed out, and I saw things as they were."

The Ambassador's head had fallen forward on his breast. Did his attitude express the fact that he had determined to look away from her in order to spare her pain? Singularly enough, the thought irritated her.

"I wish," she flashed out, with a fierceness which startled her listener, "that you would look straight at me while I am telling you this story. *I* am not ashamed. *You* need not be."

She confronted him proudly as he fixed his eyes upon her once more. One hand had stolen out ; it gripped fast the corner of a small table against which she stood.

For all response to her momentary unjust onslaught he only raised his lids, and looked back at her mildly.

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“That night was the night of the Launoy ball,” she explained, a little feverishly. “Jack met Mariotti, donned his costume, and came there in a disguise, he said, to assure himself that Lamballe was in Paris before he—Jack—set to work to pursue his search unmolested concerning the whereabouts of the chalk stratum. I told you this before—but I left out the fact that from some emotion I saw imprinted on his face, I discovered he had returned to Paris to see me. The knowledge of this, instead of inspiring me with disgust, filled me with a delightful sense of power. I pitied, I despised him, but I temporarily adored myself, until I saw what my elation might lead him to suppose. Perhaps in that one mad moment he thought I might return his passion ; but only in that one. It was a moment which he has bitterly repented since ; which he had not forestalled, rather left weakly unimagined. When he grasped the fact that I only gave him scorn in return for his acknowledgment—subsequent upon my furious accusation that he had come up to Paris because he could not remain away from me—he awoke to the consciousness of all his mad act might imply. I, too. I don’t know what I said to him—exactly. I used terms incommensurate with the crime he aspired to—only aspired to, and that vaguely. All along, though, alongside my furious onslaught, my forcing his wickedness out to light—in order to more clearly accentuate with its disclosure my strength as opposed to his lack of it—I was conscious that his complete subjugation made me glad, glad, glad ! It meant that—if you might not love me—he did. That, after all, I was not a put-on-the-shelf, but a woman, with a woman’s power to win, a woman’s right to make or unmake men. With this there came to me afterwards, with a terrible, merciless insistence which I could not beat off, the consciousness that just because I am a woman must I despise

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myself for rejoicing in the fact that I could make another suffer. But that came later. I sent him from me then. I told him I never wished to look upon his face again. I meant it. He will always recall to me an overpowering memory of my own most reprehensible vainglory."

She swayed a little. She had paused and lifted the other hand, and had laid it against the one which rested against the table. As she did this she leaned forward a little, pleadingly. The light from the lamp below her cast a warm glow into her liquid, sorrowful eyes, and made the curves of her lips curl outwards.

"He left me finally—after I had exhausted myself endeavoring impotently enough to express my contempt for him. I was afraid he might not be sure of it. It was all my fault, though. I have known that since. The sequel is to be my just punishment. Inasmuch as I deserved the blame, which I have all along known must be my portion as far as you are concerned when you learned the truth, I have never deceived myself, you may well imagine, in this particular." She stopped.

The Ambassador had raised one hand imperiously, as though to bid her discontinue her asides. She ignored the gesture rebelliously. "I will not be long," she said, gently, in answer to his distressed look.

"As he went—I shall never forget the shame in his face if I live to be a thousand years old," she interpolated impulsively, "he said 'good-bye forever!' He could not withstand that I had used one word in regard to him. That word was 'Coward.' I had also reminded him of you. I don't know why, as soon as he left, I was assailed with an awful dread that I had sent him to perdition. When you told me he had mysteriously disappeared, I at once concluded that he had put an end to himself—on my account. A vain supposition, was it not? In spite of a

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cynicism, which I took good care to foster in all those awful weeks when I so vainly strove to force Mariotti to place him in my hands, I was consumed with that one awful thought—that Jack Conway had loved me, and that I had unwittingly sent him to his doom. The idea pursued me night and day. It harrowed my waking hours and haunted my sleeping ones. Only after it had faded out—he told me, I asked him, that what I said to him had absolutely nothing to do with leading him into the midst of his enemies—then I knew how foolish I had been. Instead of being the woman you had imagined me, I was nothing but a vain, spoiled, wilful insufficiency. I could not go away without telling you the truth, and asking your forgiveness.”

She had moved around the table which had stood between them. She stood now at his side. He could hear her rustling garments. He inhaled the odor of a subtle sandal-wood scent she made use of.

“It seems to me,” she burst forth, self-accusingly, “that the last evidence of my unfaith is to reveal to you Jack’s deceit. You trusted him so ! It will rob you forever of the esteem you had garnered up for him. I wonder, Stephen,” very wistfully, “if, when I am gone, you will not, for the sake of that love we once thought might outlast a lifetime, forgive him ? It was my fault. He acknowledges now that it was merely a temporary coup de tête. He has asked me to forget it.”

“And you go where ?” asked Markoe’s voice. He was standing quite close to her, looking down at her soberly, intently. She was such a slender young thing. The soft, mutinous face had altered ; it now was set and wan. She was steadily confronting an unknown destiny as fearlessly as an infant.

She looked back at him a little waveringly. “I think I

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will go, and begin again somewhere—alone," she murmured brokenly. Her lips shook visibly. She fumblingly turned the leaves of a book which had lain at her elbow. Her eyelids were downcast.

"It will be a nine-days' wonder," remarked Markoe, calmly. "It is unfortunate that we could not have arranged the matter a trifle less radically. Why have you told me this?"

The former part of his speech had been ice cold. The latter shot forth like a projectile from the mouth of a catapult.

She looked up at him instantly ; her eyes wells of truth ; her lips still quivering a little.

"I knew of no other way but honesty," she said. "I could not leave you in the dark. It has seemed to me, all along, that it would be hardly square."

"Would my contempt, then, be so insupportable to you?"

"I think it might kill me, were I obliged to exist under it for long."

He moved up to her with a strange, guarded look in his face.

"Did it ever occur to you," he asked, huskily, "that had you not told me all this, I might have felt the same towards you?"

"No. I should not have allowed you to do that. It would not have been fair." The answer was as simple as a child's. Rather a just contrition than kindness which had ignorance for its root.

"If you expressed the desire for me to efface it," he said, shortly, "I might do so."

"Efface !"

The word was a whisper. It seemed to them both that it shot forth from a distant corner of the room.

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He explained quickly. "My 'contempt.' Yes. If it existed, if it had ever existed—which it has not. You have been just," he added, very gently. "Why should you not have given me credit for as much?"

"As much?"

The tears were slowly mounting in her wide, startled eyes. She feebly strove to lift her hand to dry them. He caught the little, tender, fragrant thing in his strong fingers, on the way.

At the physical contact she began to tremble fearfully.

"If you hold me," she faltered in a queer, choked voice, "I cannot promise to be brave."

"Suppose that you give up that, too," he suggested in a tone that—it was plainly evident—he was striving to make commonplace. She now gazed straight into his face. As she looked, the havoc wrought there within the past few weeks sprang out and made her cry agitatedly.

"You! Oh, it cannot be, it must not be, that you have suffered, too."

With a strong gesture he pushed her, very gently, far from him, still holding her fast, as though he wished to imprint every shade of her wistful face upon his heart. Into his eyes had come that powerful, luminous look which she had surprised once, and never forgotten. It seemed to envelop her. As she took cognizance of it, her anguish faded out. In its place grew a quickening of divine peace which folded its wings and settled down: a snow-white messenger straight from God.

As he looked and noted the change in her, the painfully slender figure drooping in its helpless, womanish avowal of discouragement, Markoe dropped her hand. With a magnificent possessive gesture, supreme in the acknowledgment it contained of self-revelment, he held out both his arms.

"Come," he whispered.

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Her eyes had cleared by this. Slowly, very slowly, a little unsteadily, the way a child tries its first steps towards its mother, she walked forward and laid her two hands against his. But as she did so, with the gesture she still too held him away from her. The ecstasy of his touch had almost undone her. The burning avowal in his regard was completing its work.

Her face melted into the sweetest appeal.

"You must tell me if you have known the whole truth all along?" she whispered in an awe-stricken tone.

"Yes."

"All my weakness, all his confusion, all our shame?"

"Yes."

"And you have not spoken?"

"Wherefore?"

It was half an hour later. She had drawn a stool to his feet. Her head lay back against his breast, within the circlet of his arms. The luminous look still reigned in his eyes. Her face seemed lit up by a light from some unknown sphere.

"Stephen," she murmured, "say it again, over and over and over again. Don't take it for granted that I know it. Don't presume that I have grown weary of too much loving. Tell it to me every day anew. I cannot realize that you have loved me like this all along. Why have you not spoken?"

Very tenderly he took the lovely head within the shaping of his broad palms.

"Love may not speak enough," he vouchsafed.

"What, then, shall it do?" insistently.

"Act, and be thankful."

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CHAPTER XLVI

OUR AMBASSADOR'S REPORT

THE scene is the Executive Mansion. The report is made over in the same room in which a previous interview had taken place between the President and Markoe some four years back. The season is winter ; the atmosphere muggy : Washington devoid of ozone. There is the bustle of office suggested by the President's haggard features. The head of the nation sits behind a writing table in the middle of the room.

Stephen Markoe is seated. He is speaking rapidly.

"Yes," in response to a question from his chief. "I left them all working there happily. Since Lamballe signed his lasting agreement with us, he can't stop away from the place. He says he has an interest in life now ; life with blood and tissue in it. He seeks no longer to make intellectual provender of vice as he did, when a stickler for a fairer translation of living, he pointed his moral by condemning dramatically popular, if hollow, fads. He considers his American wife a goddess. They reign over their domain like a king and queen whose subjects are their slaves. He has a positive genius for organizing. He now daily, hourly, seeks to strengthen the means, rights, and interests of the little colony in the valley below him. Whether or no he experiences the keen satisfaction, which I should imagine must be his, at thus flaunting prosperity before the eyes of his enemies, I cannot determine. Lamballe is a nobleman in the best sense of the term."

"How did he accept his defeat?"

"We cannot name it defeat precisely can we, and be

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quite just? He was made to see reason, that is all. When I arrived in France, and realized Lamballe and his will to comprise our foremost obstacle, I set to work to also understand his weak point. If the weak point is not vanity in the male sex it is very apt to be sentimentality. Sentimentality was Lamballe's flabbiest ingredient. We elected to fight him out on it. We won."

"Was your ultimatum exhaustively discussed?"

"I offered but one solution; a mutual benefit for both parties concerned."

"Was your proposal presented in the form of a threat?"

"Not exactly. Such a treatment would have been insignificant, would it not? Conway administered the supreme test. He is the man whom I took over with me to aid us. Burgess made the survey, however, after all, without his assistance; for during that time Conway lay almost hopelessly ill. When he recovered, Burgess placed the report in our hands and returned to America. To indicate to you how much sentiment is permitted to prevail within the limits of a so-called business transaction in France, I wish to cite one particular concerning that chalk dispute. When we finally induced Lamballe to accept our terms, or else force us to treat with Prussia, we naturally, upon his acquiescence, bade him confirm Burgess's report. This he refused to do. He considered it 'a breach of etiquette,' he announced, to do less than believe in our honesty. We insisted. He declined. We deplored his ingenuousness for his own sake—reflecting that if he ever were led into treating with persons of less upright calibre, he might be undone. We accepted his decree."

Markoe paused. He lifted his hand to his pocket. His eyes twinkled oddly—a rare thing with this servant of the government who was quoted almost totally devoid of humor. He continued, his voice taking on a lively tone

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which held the President's attention the way a magnet attracts steel.

"You may well imagine my surprise just before quitting France to receive the following letter from Conway. He went West immediately after our transaction was terminated."

Markoe drew a folded paper from his pocket. He unfolded it in a leisurely manner. Then he laid it on his knee, cleared his throat portentously, that unusual twinkle broadening a trifle in his eyes, placed his glasses across the bridge of his nose—preparatory to reading the letter aloud—and said, as though inserting an after-thought,—

"Conway is the average type of New Yorker who staggers under the weight of rank prosperity for a time, and then shakes it off, takes his individual privilege between his teeth, and fights for his birthright to defeat obstacles. He detests being foiled. Perhaps he does not stand alone in this particular."

"Our constitution may be said to consist of as much," interpolated the President, dryly.

"In the first part of our assumption of foreign affairs we were accused more than once of lack of diplomacy. I, being a novice, did not gainsay the accusation, nor did I ever hint to Conway that he should do so. As I said, latterly I received this letter."

He ran his glance over the opening lines, fixed the frame of his glasses more firmly upon the bridge of his nose, and began,—

"I met Burgess recently. The old fellow has gone to pieces considerably. A son has run off with his earnings of twenty years, and left him penniless. He was garrulous as ever. He gave me the biggest shock of my life. He had set to work as usual anathematizing the entire Euro-

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pean community, when he let me in for the following. "I outdid 'em once," he said, with a knowing leer. I asked him to explain himself. "It was when I drew up that chalk report," he answered. "It was a provision of the Almighty that sent you up to Paris that night to fall into the hands of Mariotti and his crew. In your absence, the next day, I made the survey. That 'ere durned chalk stopped two feet short of the border. If Lamballe weren't a furriner he'd a'found it out long ago." "

"The letter continues,—

" "You may not be unmindful of the fact that I have been brought up in the belief that all is fair in love and war. Personally, I have more than once been convinced of this theory—as regards war. Say, for instance, a man contests a problem with an antagonist who comes to the fray poorly equipped. The deficiency of the enemy is not the fault of the opposing party; rather his opportunity. *N'est-ce-pas?*—as our French friends would say. This is not irrelevant. It concerns the Carembourg affair. Do you remember the night Lamballe consented to forego his prejudice, I proffered him Burgess's report, asking him to procure a French expert to confirm it in his—Lamballe's—interest? He refused—claiming that French etiquette imposed that he should take our word for it. I suspected Burgess faintly all along. I had experienced a ghoulisn sensation that our chosen surveyor was a slippery customer more than once. I do not know why. I set forth the night of that tenth of June to confirm my suspicion that he intended to play Lamballe. I failed to accomplish my object. When Burgess's report was handed in I thought at first I would go down myself, and have a look at the premises. Then I decided, why not let well enough alone? Lamballe is satisfied: our victory is complete. There can be no error. The affair went

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out for me entirely after I left Paris—until I met Burgess. I cogitated over his startling communication not a little. Abroad one's pulse gets the best of one's conscience. Out here a man has time, and will, to think. You have fully established our interests, and shipped several hundred cargoes of chalk homewards ; in spite of which I ask you to submit this letter to Lamballe, and give him the benefit of Burgess's fraud.' "

Markoe placed the letter in its envelope, lifted his eyeglasses from the bridge of his nose, and met the President's eyes with his own.

"Did you inform Lamballe of Conway's communication?"

"I made my way to Carembourg shortly afterwards. The valley was smoking peacefully. Homeliness and industry were holding full sway. I paid my respects to the overseer. Then I asked Lamballe to go for a walk. We finally strolled across the meadows towards the edge of a stream, where once a blood-red row of poppies bore silent witness to the dividing line between Germany and France. It had been replaced by a miniature fortification of upturned earth. We looked back. 'A happy, sunshiny place, eh, Lamballe?' I suggested ; 'I take it you would not reverse your decision now if you might?' 'Your surmise is correct,' he confirmed ; 'I thank fortune chance intervened to point out to me the error of my ways.' 'Say the chalk had not extended across the border?' I ventured. He looked at me sharply. 'What would have happened then?' I asked. 'I think, monsieur l'Ambassadeur,' he said, 'that life is too short for the guessing of conundrums.' 'But suppose,' I insisted. He refused. I drew Conway's letter from my pocket. I handed it to him. His expression did not change perceptibly as he mastered

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its contents. He smiled faintly, however, as he returned it to me. 'The contract is a fait accompli,' he said. 'Conway is my wife's son, otherwise he might not have gotten off so easily.' Later he remarked—his tone was harsh, but his face bright—'It is curious to note the similarity between Conway's naif assumption of my generosity, and the policy of that wily diplomat Talleyrand.' 'What was Talleyrand's policy?' I inquired. 'When in doubt—don't,' quoted Lamballe."

"What did you answer?" demanded the President. He was leaning forward, the palm of each hand upon the cap of each knee.

"I said, 'You do Conway an injustice. We have established a new heraldry!' 'What is it?' Lamballe asked sceptically. To the Old World there is a supreme eternal irony in our audacity. 'When in doubt—do,' I said."

Markoe folded the letter neatly, and placed it in his vest pocket.

"You say his name is——?"

"Conway."

"He is the son of——?"

"He is the offspring of an unancestried race that is not afraid to be."

"An ideal record was started there to the west of us thirty-eight years ago," mused the President aloud. He added, with an exultant ring in his voice,—

"A man who makes just use of grace, like Conway, not alone sustains. He approaches it."

THE END

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